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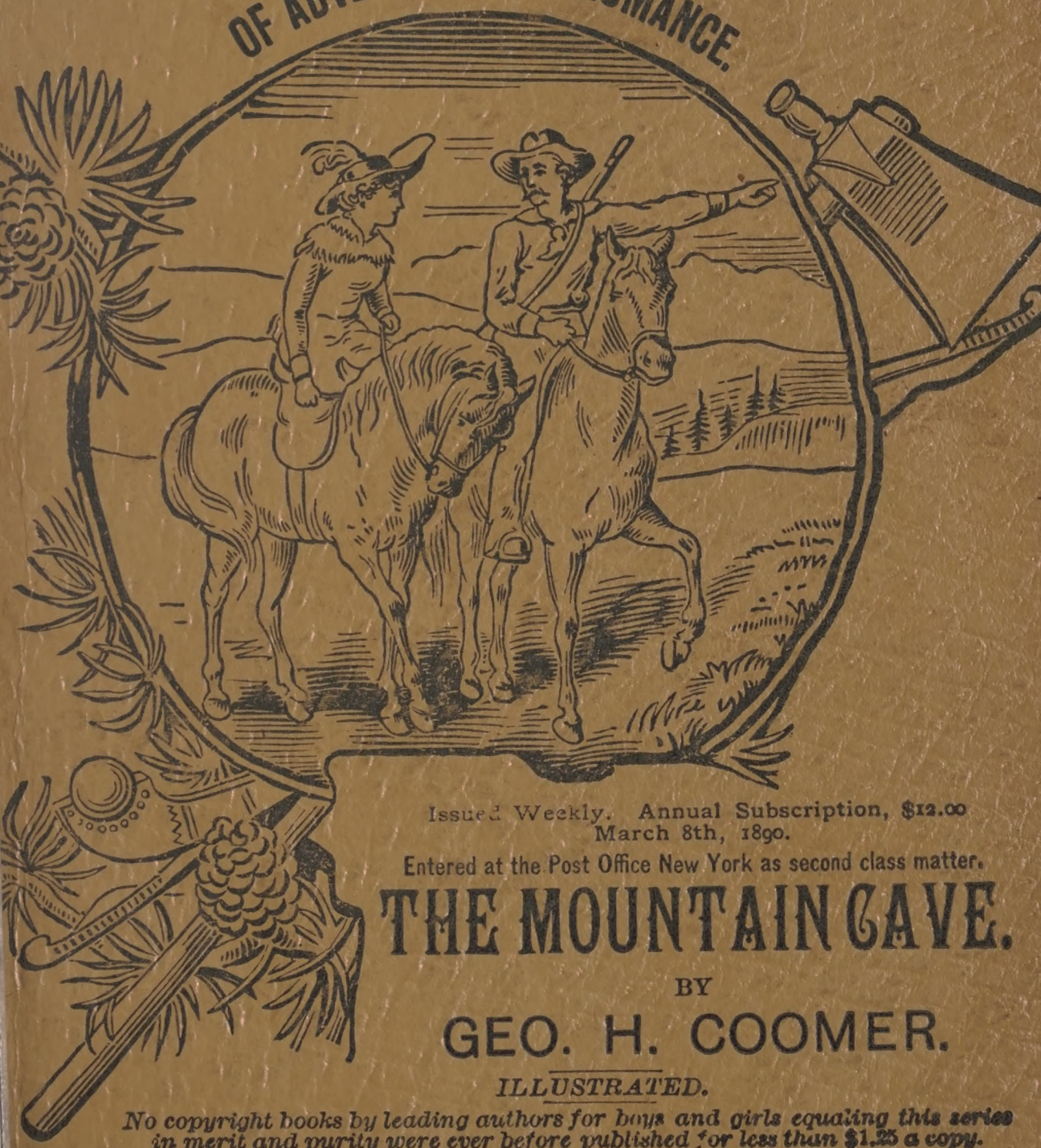

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THE MOUNTAIN CAVE.

BY

GEO. H. COOMER.

ILLUSTRATED.

No copyright books by leading authors for boys and girls equaling this series in merit and purity were ever before published for less than $1.25 a copy.

FRANK F. LOVELL & COMPANY,
NEW YORK.

WALTER DAYTON CAPTURED BY ROBBERS. See page 11.

THE MOUNTAIN CAVE;

OR,

THE MYSTERY OF THE SIERRA NEVADA.

BY

GEORGE H. COOMER,

AUTHOR OF "THE BOYS IN THE FORECASTLE," ETC., ETC.

40 Leatherdale Tales

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THE MOUNTAIN CAVE.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS CAPTURE.

THE stage coach made its way laboriously, for the road was difficult. It was under the very shadow of the Sierra Nevada. The passengers were weary, and conversation flagged.

Suddenly the general lassitude was forgotten in as general an interest.

"It was only two months ago that my father was robbed of all his property," said a bright-faced girl of fifteen, who occupied the left-hand corner of the rear seat.

A fine, manly-looking boy, somewhat crowded in the forward part of the coach, raised his head quickly, scanning the fair young passenger with an air of sympathy.

Every one manifested an eager curiosity, and the girl's cheeks flushed as she saw what attention she had drawn to herself.

"All his property!" exclaimed a female passenger, to whom the remark had seemed to be addressed. "How sorry I am for you! Was it a large amount?"

"Yes, ma'am; it was very large."

"War it in gold, miss?" queried a miner.

"Yes, sir; all in gold."

"Way up 'mong the thousands, you say, miss?" put in a second miner.

"Yes, sir."

"All his pile! That war hard on him!"

"It was very hard, sir."

"Robbed, I think you said, miss?" put in a somewhat elderly man who sat next to the boy. "Pray, how did it happen?"

"The gold was on board an express train, sir, and the train was boarded by a band of masked robbers."

"Two months ago? No doubt I must have read of it."

"Yes, sir; it was in all the papers."

"Let's see—two months ago—there are so many such robberies now—two months ago. And your father lost—how much did you say?"

"A hundred thousand dollars, sir."

"A hundred thousand dollars! Is it possible?"

"Yes, sir; a hundred thousand dollars in gold."

"Whew!" came from the crowd of passengers, and there was a low whistle as of incredulity from one or two of them. But a something in the young and truly beautiful face was calculated to check this demonstration.

"A hundred thousand dollars in gold!" ejaculated half a dozen voices.

"Mercy on us! what a dreadful loss!" came from the lady passenger. "And your father has nothing left?"

"Nothing, ma'am; he had sold all his interest in the mines, and this was his whole property."

"How I pity you! Oh, if such villains could be brought to justice!"

"'Twar a big jolt!" said one of the miners.

"Enough to make a man feel like passing in his chips," said another.

"I'd like to get my clutches on the scoundrels," remarked a third.

"Yes; I remember reading of it," said the elderly

man, "and how your father—Mr.—your father, no doubt it was—Mr.——"

"Mercer," pronounced the girl.

"Yes, yes; how a Mr. Mercer had lost all he possessed. It is a shame that such things should be. No trace yet, I suppose?"

"No, sir; not the least. The robbers vanished, and nothing is known of them."

"It is a hard case," suggested the elderly man; "there is a great deal of mystery about these robberies."

On all sides there were expressions of sympathy for the beautiful young girl so suddenly reduced from affluence to poverty. But perhaps the look in the kind, pitying eyes of the boy upon the front seat told more than all else.

"Outrageous!" he exclaimed, as if half to himself. "All the earnings of a life-time! Oh, how I would like to hunt the villains down!"

"No doubt, no doubt," said the elderly man. "So we all would; but I fear it would prove a very long hunt. So your name," he added, "is Walter Dayton, and you are out on a long vacation, as you say."

"Yes, sir; I shall not go home for some time."

"Has your father ever suffered from these robberies that are so often taking place?"

"Yes, once or twice, to the amount of a few thousands; but his loss has been nothing in comparison to Mr.—Mr. Mercer's." And he stole another look at the pretty girl's face.

Twilight was now closing around, and the stage had still far to go. The road seemed to grow wilder as evening shut down, and a sense of insecurity was apparent among the passengers.

"Brought your gun along, I presume?" said Walter's elderly friend. "Boys generally love shooting."

"Oh, certainly—wouldn't come along without my

rifle ; it's stowed away on the top of the stage—a repeater, and a very good one, I think."

"How fearfully gloomy it is getting," said the lady passenger.

"Yes," replied the young girl ; "I hope there are no robbers about."

"I hope so too. No wonder you think of them. I sympathize with you so much, my dear miss."

"Thank you. It *is* lonesome. I suppose my father is wondering where Maud is to-night."

"Oh-ho," thought Walter Dayton, "so her name is Maud. Don't think I shall forget that."

Then he guessed that she might be motherless, because nothing was said of her mother. And he wondered that the woman did not ask her about it, or inquire her destination. But he finally concluded that she might have told so much without his hearing it, before she spoke of the robbery.

"A hundred thousand dollars in gold!" murmured a passenger in the darkness, as if he had been dwelling upon that idea. "That war a big jolt!"

And Walter guessed him to be the same miner who had called it "a big jolt" once before.

"Any dust in perticular aboard this stage?" queried another voice.

"Like enough—reckon the' may be."

"'Cause I'm thinking," said the first, "that we'm a gittin' into a nice place to onload it, if the' is. Them ar' road agents might—"

"Mercy! what a lurch!" said the woman.

"Dear me! will the stage upset?" asked poor little Maud, plaintively.

"Horses got a sniff at a b'ar," called the driver from his seat, as if he felt lonesome and in need of sympathy.

"Bears! Oh!"

"Bears! For mercy sake!" echoed the other.

"Never fear, ladies," said one of the men, "b'ars won't tackle a stage."

"Never knowed 'em to," remarked another.

Walter tried to look out from the open window, but he was too far forward to reach it.

"Begin to feel ticklish?" asked the elderly man.

"No, sir; only I thought if there was a grizzly about, I would like to see him."

"Your gun is in the wrong place."

"Yes; I thought of that when we were talking about the robbers."

"Well, it wouldn't do you much good, outside or in, if they were to show themselves. Best policy to take it easy."

The horses went very fast for a few minutes, then apparently coming to a steep and long ascent, they slackened their pace to a walk, and their shod hoofs could be heard fairly taking hold of the hard road—"clump, clump, clump"—as they toiled up.

The thicket on both sides looked fearfully black, and it was pitch dark in the stage.

The driver still needed all the moral support which the consciousness of not being quite alone could give him, and once or twice he shouted back an explanatory word or two, loud enough to be heard inside.

"Yes; 'twas grizzlies back thar," he said. "Git up!" and the whip cracked like a pistol. "'Bout a mile o' hill now—I hate it! G'lang!"

"'Bout long here's whar that driver was killed a year ago," remarked some one, consolingly. "The robbers laid in——"

But the sentence was left unfinished. A terrible uproar reigned outside.

"*Hands up!*"

What a cry it was! Feet tramped, gunlocks clicked, and the rays of a dark lantern fell full upon the front of the stage. The horses snorted and turned aside,

then came to a dead stop. There was a strong hand upon the bits.

The men grasped their pistols, the lady passenger screamed, and from the dark corner where the young girl was seated there came piteous sounds that showed how dreadfully frightened she was.

Walter thought of his gun on the top of the stage. Oh, if he but had it now!

"Sit still," said the elderly man, "you can't do anything. See what they want."

But even he was clutching his pistol, for the boy's hand touched the barrel as he shifted his position.

In a moment, however, it could be seen how vain was any show of resistance. Three or four rifle muzzles were pointing in at each of the opposite doors of the stage, and the driver was already standing on the ground, a helpless prisoner.

Those of the passengers who had weapons surrendered them, and then the whole group, one after another, descended. As they did so they were flanked by the masked robbers and almost touched by the rifle muzzles.

"You've got the drop on us and it can't be helped!" remarked the elderly man grimly, as he looked around upon his captors.

The scene, as revealed by the lantern glare, was a confused and strange one. Here and there a captive was led aside from the others and roughly interrogated. Especially was this the case with the elderly passenger, who appeared to receive very surly treatment.

Walter Dayton saw the stage thoroughly overhauled, and among other things, his superbly finished rifle taken from its place to be examined and admired. It was a birthday present from his father, and he would not have parted with it for a thousand dollars.

But most of all, the boy's attention was directed to poor little Maud; for he thought what an ordeal this must be to the delicate, sensitive girl.

One of the robber guards took the liberty to lift the brim of her hat.

"You are a cowardly scoundrel," said Walter, boiling over, "besides being a thief!"

"Silence!" growled the fellow, raising his pistol threateningly.

"Yes; you may shoot," said the boy. "I shall say what I like."

"Oh, please don't anger them," said Maud, hurriedly; "please don't!"

"But such villains! It makes me mad!"

"You're a for'ard youth," remarked the man with the pistol, "but you'd better keep still."

"Then be civil!" said Walter, as he relapsed into silence, but almost unconsciously clenched his fist.

The rummaging was soon over, and the passengers were ordered to resume their journey. Walter was about re-entering the stage with the others, when he was surprised to find himself forcibly detained by the hands of two or three men.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded. "Take off your hands, will you?"

"Oh, never mind the meaning," said a voice. "We want you, that's all. You shall not be hurt; but you can't go in the stage; you must come with us."

He struggled for release, but in vain. The elderly man expostulated with the robbers from the stage window, and even the young girl raised her voice in entreaty; but the only answer was the stern command to "be off," made the more imperative by the ominous click of firelocks.

Finding the stage gone, and resistance useless, Walter saw the wisdom of accepting the inevitable with the best grace he could. His arms were

pinioned, and he had now but to accompany the robbers, rightly judging that they must have horses at no great distance.

The meaning of his detention was a mystery. Of course these desperate men could not have encumbered themselves with him from mere wantonness. Yet why he more than another? He, a boy, and wholly unknown to them until this moment?

Be their object what it may, however, he still defied them in spirit.

"I'd fight you if I could," he said, as he obeyed the direction to move, "and I'll be even with you yet!"

The remark elicited no reply; and taking up their booty, among which he saw by the lantern light his own precious rifle, the beauty of which had so struck their fancy, they hurried him away with them.

CHAPTER II.

A WILD RIDE.

The horses, close under the cover of a thicket, were invisible in the darkness till the rays of the lantern fell upon them. Then their forms could be seen, as they whinnied and pawed the ground with impatience.

"Going to blindfold him?" asked one of the robbers.

"No," replied another, who appeared to be the leader, "it isn't necessary as yet."

"I should say not!" was the boy's mental comment, as he looked about him at the black thickets and the cloudy sky, unable to distinguish one point of the compass from another.

"I'll take him up before me for a while," said the last speaker, "and afterwards some of you may try him."

"A mighty long ride, it must be, if they are going to shift me about in that way," thought Walter.

As the horses were unfastened and led close together, he made them out to be twelve in number, and all apparently of a bay color—not a single black or white one among them.

"I know why that is," he thought; "they can't be seen so far off, and can't be seen at all in the night till a fellow stumbles across them."

While these preparations were in progress, he would have made a dash for freedom, but for two reasons—first, that his arms were bound, and a boy cannot run without arms; and second, that a stout ruffian all the while held him with an iron grip.

The scene reminded him of a circus, and the thickets seemed to make the tent.

All else being ready, Walter was lifted upon a horse. His arms were now loosed, but to prevent the possibility of escape, a stout cord was passed from one of his ankles to the other, under the animal's body.

He felt the humiliation of his position keenly, thus to be tied upon a horse like a criminal; but his good sense told him that to fight against it would be the height of folly. He submitted; but it was with a mental reservation that looked beyond the hour.

"If they should not kill me," he thought, "my turn will come. As sure as I live I will find means to bring them to justice!"

The robber who seemed in command now mounted behind him; the lantern was extinguished, and the cavalcade set forth.

At first, for a mile or two, they took the road; then turned aside and continued their way through a wild, rough country, which it seemed marvelous to the boy that they could so traverse on horseback in the darkness.

"Where was now the stage coach?" he asked himself, and was not Maud Mercer at that very moment wondering what was his fate? What was the oldish man saying of him? And how long would it be ere his case would become generally known? What measures would be taken for his rescue?

"I must depend on myself," he said. "All the police in California would not be able to find me in these mountains."

Then the thought of Mr. Mercer's loss recurred to him.

"I guess I am following his treasure box," he mused. "These are the fellows that got it. A hundred thousand dollars in gold! Only about eight thousand dollars apiece, after all. But perhaps not that, for nobody knows how many more there may be in the gang."

He had felt too sullenly indignant at first to manifest any curiosity; but now he resolved to speak.

"What do you want with me?" he asked abruptly.

"No matter now — you will know presently," replied the robber.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Never mind that."

"Where are you going to take me?"

"You will see when you get there."

Walter was high-spirited. He could have struck the villain for his curt answers; and he was sorry for having deigned to ask any questions.

On and on they went for miles, sometimes in what seemed open ground, and at other times passing through strips of timber, where the great trees, although they stood wide apart, made almost total darkness beneath them.

"Number Two," said the leader at length; "you may give me a spell now; your horse may as well carry double as mine."

The squad halted, and the transfer was quickly accomplished. Walter taking up his position in front of "Number Two," though not till he had made one desperate effort to escape, and been half strangled by a grasp upon his throat.

It seemed as if the ride would be interminable. It must be long, he knew, to require this shifting.

"Look out for him," said "Number One," as he resigned his charge to the other; "he's slippery."

"Well, you just fasten that ankle good and strong," replied "Number Two;" "and he's got to take the horse with him if he leaves!"

Accustomed as the robbers were to the country, they still found extreme difficulty in many places, having at times to pick their way with great caution.

Once there was a sudden commotion among them, and three or four of the headmost poured a rapid fusillade through the darkness. An ugly roar close to them set all the horses to dancing, and then some heavy animal rushed forward, but fell as he did so, and lay floundering upon the ground.

"Fetched him!" cried one of the men who had fired. "A derned good shot in the dark! It's a grizzly!"

There was some confusion, and various questions and exclamations were heard.

"Whar is he?"

"Whoa, John!"

"Dead?"

"Whoa, Bill!"

"Right hyar in front of us!"

"Whoa, Dick!"

The horses gave him a wide berth as they passed on, snuffing the air and snorting.

Walter almost forgot that he was a prisoner, in the excitement of the thing. But the robbers were not

on a bear hunt, and hurried forward without even dismounting to examine their game.

The moon at length rose, and about the same time, much to the boy's relief, he judged from a remark of one of the band that they were getting near their place of retreat.

Presently they halted, and a bandage was put over Walter's eyes, while his arms were pinioned to prevent him from raising it.

Still he kept a stout heart, and tried to think only of the day when he should stand as a witness in some court of justice, and testify of all this. "It will come," he said to himself; "*it will come if I live!*"

For what seemed a mile further, the party continued on horseback, then dismounted; and Walter felt himself led through ways that he knew must be very intricate.

At last a halt was reached, and then, as the bandage was taken from his eyes, he found himself in what seemed a prison of solid rock. There were lanterns burning, revealing three or four masked men, who stood looking curiously upon him as if to enjoy his surprise.

CHAPTER III.

THE PRICE OF A REFUSAL.

For a moment the lad glanced about the gloomy den in a bewildered manner; but he quickly recovered himself. Indignation was still uppermost in his mind, and he felt a grim determination not to gratify his captors by any show of astonishment, much less of fear.

"Well, boy," said one of the masked men, whose voice Walter recognized as that of the supposed leader; "what do you think of it as far as you have gone?"

"I think it a cowardly outrage," replied the lad, defiantly.

"So you are not afraid of us, you young fool?"

"No; I'm not afraid of you; and I don't think that I am a fool, either."

"Well, you may have reason to change your mind in both respects. You are in terrible hands, and in a terrible place."

"I would rather be in my place than yours."

"You are a plucky one, but you are where pluck won't count you much."

"That I cannot help."

"Your father is worth five hundred thousand dollars."

"How do you know?"

"I do know."

"Well, and what of it?"

"His name is Edward Dayton, and your name is Walter Dayton."

"Yes."

"All right; I only wanted to start fair. Are you hungry?"

"No."

"You have had a long ride, and here is enough to eat, you see. If you keep a civil tongue in your head and obey directions, you will be well treated."

"I want nothing to eat here," said Walter. "I want only to know what all this means."

"That's very natural, and we'll see about it presently," replied the robber.

He then led his prisoner to another part of the den, and left him with only a lantern for company.

Beginning to realize that he was very tired, Walter threw himself down upon something which had the appearance of a rude couch; but he could not sleep.

He thought over his journey in the stage coach, and recalled all that had been said of the mysterious

robbers. He remembered the faces of the passengers. Who was the elderly man, so calm and sensible—so sociable from the very first?

Walter started at this point in his cogitations.

"I told him my name," he said to himself, "and then he seemed to know about my father. These robbers know my father's name and mine. That's very singular—looks queer. I did not say how much property my father has, but I thought the old gentleman seemed to know—and now the robbers know too. Perhaps he dropped something by accident. But why should he have mentioned me unless they asked him? And why should they have asked him? Why should they have treated me so roughly and taken me so far apart?

"It looks as if they expected my father to pay them something for me—I have heard of such things. I wish I could see their faces! I don't think they all stopped at this place—some of them kept on. I wonder what they have done with the gold they stole from Mr. Mercer?"

Several weary hours were passed in these reflections; then Walter heard a stir in the outer part of the cavern, and presently robber Number One made his appearance.

"Been asleep?" he asked.

"No."

"Not used to roughing it, probably?"

"No; but I'm glad I don't have to wear a mask."

"Boy," said the robber; "you have something to learn. I suppose you have always done as you *would;* now you are where you will do as you *must.* I'll have no fooling. Your father is worth a great deal of money, and if he is ever to see you again, he must pay for the privilege."

"Indeed—that seems hard," said Walter.

"Here is a letter to him," continued the villain;

"which you will copy and sign. We could do very well without your hand in the matter, but I prefer to take this way."

Walter read the epistle, which was not a very long one, but couched in moving terms. It painted his condition as very painful, and likely to become still worse. In short, it was an appeal artfully calculated to fill his parents with distraction. It referred to a letter from the robbers, which was to accompany it, and humbly begged that their demands might be complied with. His father was to deposit eighty thousand dollars in bonds, according to given directions; and the least suspicion of treachery would be fatal.

"I would not have my mother read this for all the world!" thought Walter.

"Now come with me to the outer room," directed the robber.

Walter obeyed.

"There are pen, ink and paper on that table; you will sit down there and copy what you have read," said Number One, while other masked men stood around in silence.

"You expect me to copy that letter?" remarked Walter, interrogatively.

"Yes; and to ask no more questions."

"Suppose I refuse!"

"Refuse! What are you talking of?"

"But if I should say I won't do it?"

"I'd blow your brains out in an instant! No more words! Sit down and do as I tell you!"

And Number One jerked a pistol from his belt with his right hand, while with his left he slapped the paper savagely as it lay on the table.

"I shall not sign it!" said Walter, decisively.

The robber's face could not be seen, but his manner was that of an infuriated tiger. His pistol was a

revolver of the heaviest class, and he leveled it full at the boy's head, with his stout, muscular arm.

All the others drew their weapons at the same moment.

Walter's face was pale, but there was the fire of an unshaken determination in his eyes.

"I give you one more chance," said the robber. "Will you sign the letter?"

"*No!*"

He could look right into the black muzzle, but the single word he spoke was full and clear and determined.

"If I am to die," he thought, "I cannot help it. I will be true to myself; *that* is in my power."

For perhaps half a minute the pistol remained pointing into his face; then it was quickly reversed, and with its butt a stunning blow was dealt him upon the head.

Walter fell to the ground, but consciousness was suspended only for a moment. As he revived he heard a few words of conversation between the robbers.

"I don't want the old gentleman to pick out boys for me," said one; this 'ere's the wust mule I ever see."

"I don't care so much about the money," remarked Number One. "I don't like the breed. It's an old debt, you know."

"Had we better take him away to the cave?" asked a voice.

"No; he's just as well here. If he should live to report, he'll tell only of this place."

"What you goin' to do with him?"

"Do? I'm going to starve him to it; it won't take long—that'll fetch him."

"But what's the use of his signing?"

"O, 'twould work on the old folks' feelings—be

sure to bring the dust. His mother—and all that, you know——"

"'Course, she'd insist upon plankin' down the pile right off."

"Certainly she would. Ha, ha, he's hearing every word we say, I believe! Coming to, eh?"

Number One jerked the victim savagely to his feet, and pushed him towards the table.

"Now take that pen and write," he roared; "or I'll give you another rap on the head. Will you do it?"

"No," said the boy. "I tell you once for all that *I will not!*"

The ruffian raised his pistol as if for a blow, but restrained himself.

"No, I won't do that," he said; "I know how to cook your goose. Starvation will bring you to it. You don't get a morsel to eat or drink till that paper is copied and signed. You may not be very hungry now, but you will be in course of a week or two."

"My body is in your power," said Walter; "but my soul——"

"And your soul, too, you will find! Come along—I have had enough of this!" And the scoundrel, grasping the boy by the collar, pushed him violently into a sort of closet, which he proceeded to barricade, leaving only a small opening at the top, about the height of Walter's chin.

Nothing could be more forlorn than his position, but still his sensitive heart scorned the idea of yielding to the demands of these low villains. Resentment, self-respect, and the loathing he felt for his persecutors, all contributed to uphold him.

"There," said the enraged robber; "it is starve or sign. You can take your choice."

CHAPTER IV.

THE TEMPTATION OF WATER.

As the man turned and left him, Walter felt his situation to be trying beyond description ; yet he was by no means without hope. The fellows, he argued, could gain nothing by putting him to death, but, on the contrary, would thereby defeat their own project. Besides, his signature, however it might facilitate their purpose, was not indispensable to it. It was, therefore, on his part, only a question of endurance.

"Should the whole thing miscarry," he said, "and all hope of the money be given up, there is no knowing how I might fare at last ; but be that as it may, they shall never have my assistance in the work. Eighty thousand dollars from my father! It is more than I am worth! I hope he will never pay it. To think of gratifying these scheming outlaws by paying them money to let me go!"

But he thought of his mother, and his feelings were torturing, as he imagined what she might suffer.

"She will be frantic over it," he reflected. "She will feel more in an hour than these scamps would be capable of suffering in a whole lifetime. She will neither eat nor sleep."

What a wretched predicament he had got into! "But I will be true to myself," he added ; "I am entirely decided on that point, *come what may!* Who knows but I may somehow bring these robbers to justice? *I will if I ever get out of their hands!*"

This last idea had all along been prominent in his mind. It was associated with the thought of poor little Maud Mercer and her father's bitter misfortune, and so appealed to him with double power.

If he could only be the means of helping her!

The thought, even in his forlorn condition, was thrilling and sustaining.

Again his ride in the stage coach was passed in review, and each face recalled. "That elderly man," he mused; "I wonder who he could have been, and if he really did say anything about me to the gang. I wonder where he is now—and I wonder where the girl is, too. I wish she had said something about her destination."

In such reflections a number of hours were passed. Walter could occasionally hear a stir in some other part of the den, but there were no indications of release.

Finally, he fell asleep; though he would once have supposed it impossible to do so in a situation so truly discouraging. But his powers of mental control were greater than he might have supposed, and he was, besides, extremely tired.

The dreariness of awakening in this wretched prison was trying beyond measure, for his excitement was now gone, and he had only to think of his position.

It seemed to him that his nap must have been somewhat long. He felt no great desire for food, but he was oppressed by thirst.

"How long can I live without water?" he asked himself; and the question suggested some dubious anticipations. Nevertheless his resolve remained unshaken.

Presently a footstep approached.

"Well, my young friend, how are you enjoying yourself?" asked a voice, which he knew to be that of Number One.

There was no answer.

"Are you asleep?" asked the robber.

"No."

"Do you want food or water?"

"I would like a drink of water."

"Are you ready to do what I require?"

"What is that?"

"To sign the letter."

"No."

"Here is a plenty to eat, and here is a plenty to drink; you have only to transcribe the letter and sign it, and you may feast to your heart's content. What do you say?"

"I say that I will not do it!"

"If you are thirsty now, you will be a good deal more thirsty by and by. You will have to sign at last, and you would save yourself much suffering by doing it now."

"If you have nothing more to say," replied Walter, "you may as well leave me. *I shall not sign!*"

"Very well; we will see!" was the robber's remark as he turned away.

"What I may suffer," thought Walter, "will make no difference to my resolution. They will not let me die; I know that very well; but even if I did not know it, I would be just as much determined."

He then heard the robbers talking with each other, and could at times catch whole sentences of their conversation.

"He is one of the boys that we read of," said Number One. "Why, he is a real Andrew Jackson! I can't help respecting the fellow. What a chap he would make for *our* profession!"

"O, he has pluck enough," remarked another, "but he will give in at last. He can't stand this sort of thing a great while."

"Certainly not," replied Number One; "but then it is of no great consequence whether he signs or not. I can fix all that."

But here, as the speaker went on, his voice fell so

that Walter caught only fragments of his remarks. The robber appeared to be speaking of some one whom he expected at the place, and whose aid would be all that he would require.

"Yes," he said, "he will do it. Why, man, he could fool the president of a bank. They'll certainly think it all right. I want you to see a specimen; it will be a curiosity to you."

"O, I know he beats everything in that line," replied the other. "It will answer all purposes, no doubt."

"Yes," said Number One, "and now I don't care for the other at all; this trick will serve our turn, and the boy's stubbornness won't matter."

"Ah, ha!" thought Walter, "some trick! Well, at least I shall not be responsible for what they do. I shall know that *I* did not do it, and they will know it, too; so their victory will be all outside, and that is no victory at all."

He thought, with a kind of heart-swelling, of the lines of Burns:

"The honest man, though e'er sa' poor,
Is king o' men, for a' that."

The want of water soon came to be a very serious matter.

"I wish I could stop thinking about it," Walter said to himself; but still there was not the least wavering in his determination. The robbers should see that no amount of suffering could bring him to their terms.

"I'll teach them a thing or two," he added, spitefully. "They may rob express trains and stages, but they shan't rob me of *myself*. I set them just as much at defiance as if I were ever so free."

Then he went on thinking of shipwrecked crews who could get no water; and imagined what a beautiful sight a running stream must be to them as they

approached some unknown shore. He wondered that he had not thought more of the precious fluid when he could get enough of it; and he could easily understand how thirst becomes far more dreadful than hunger to those who are deprived of both food and water.

After some hours there seemed to be a consultation in the cave such as he had not previously remarked. Low voices were talking very earnestly, and he imagined that he could hear Number One explaining some matter and giving directions concerning it.

"You can easily do it," he heard the robber say, "and they will never know the difference."

Another weary season of suspense, and then Number One again presented himself.

"You spoke of wanting water," he said. "Are you ready to do my bidding?"

"No," said Walter, "and you may set your heart at rest that I never shall be ready. I want water, but I will die before I will sell my independence for it."

"But here it is," said the robber, "right in my hand, good and cool; and here is the paper in the other hand. Certainly you will not die a lingering death for mere stubbornness." And he held up the tempting liquid.

"I have told you my determination," said Walter, "and that is enough. I despise you and your gang of thieves, as I despise all cowards and villains."

There was not the least frenzy manifested in the boy's words; nothing but a cool, unhesitating defiance.

The robber chief was surprised rather than angry.

"Don't you know," he said, "that you are entirely in my power?"

"No."

"Suppose I give you no water?"

"Then I shall not have any."

"Then why are you not in my power?"

"Because I think for myself, and will say what I please."

"So you think the mind of more consequence than the body?"

"Yes, I do—of a million times more consequence."

"That might be all well enough in a sermon," said Number One, "but it would amount to nothing if I were hard-hearted enough to push matters, or, rather, if I had any necessity for pushing matters."

"That is *your* way of looking at it," said Walter.

"And it would be *yours*, too, if I were disposed to make it so."

"Very well," remarked Walter, calmly, "you can try me and see!"

The masked robber turned away, carrying back the pitcher of water and the paper; but in a few moments he again stood before Walter's cell, and the boy was surprised to see him set about tearing down the barricade.

"You may come out," said the brigand. "My last appeal to you was only experimental. I wished to see if you still held out. The matter has all been fixed for the last two hours, and I have no need of your assistance. On the table yonder are food and drink, and you are free to help yourself. When you are comfortable again I will show you a specimen of penmanship that will make you think you must have written something in your sleep."

CHAPTER V.

A MYSTERIOUS FORGERY.

As Walter sat down at the robbers' table, he was careful to ask himself the mental question as to

whether there was any humiliation in obeying the brigand's command by so doing.

"No," he reasoned, "I have not yielded anything; I have even gained a victory. I have shown them that they cannot make me obey them. If they were to tell me that I must say even so simple a thing as 'thank you,' before eating this meal, I would not touch a mouthful."

The cool spring water in the pitcher nerved and revived him exceedingly; and looking about him he saw that the outlet of the cavern was secured by a rude door, which under the present circumstances, at least, precluded any chance of escape. The robbers still wore their masks, on account, as he believed, of his presence.

"I wish I could catch them bare-faced," he thought; "but no doubt they will take good care not to let me do it."

"Now," said Number One, when Walter had finished his meal; "I will show you how easily we road agents bring to pass whatever we desire."

"But one of your desires was to make me beg my father to give you eighty thousand dollars."

"True; and you wouldn't do it; so we have got on without your help—that is what I mean to say—we have more than one string to our bow, you must understand."

He then held out for the boy's inspection what seemed a letter; but still kept fast hold of it, as if afraid that his strange and willful prisoner might otherwise tear it in pieces.

Walter saw that it was a transcript of the letter to his father which had already been shown him. But how great was his surprise to perceive that the writing presented a perfect fac-simile of his own hand, with his name at the bottom, looking in every particular as if he himself had placed it there.

"I think that it is rather well done," said the robber.

"It is a villainous forgery!" said Walter. "And you mean to send this letter to my father as mine?"

"Certainly, that is why I have had it transcribed."

"But who could have known anything of my handwriting? How could my autograph or anything of the kind have been got at? There was not a scrap of writing of any description about me when I came here, that I was aware of."

"O, there is a mountain spirit that tells us these things," replied the robber. "Should you remain with us long enough, you would find that nothing is hidden from us which we wish to know."

Walter was too stubbornly proud to manifest surprise, so he simply entered his protest.

"So you will send that letter?" he said.

"Yes, of course I shall; it is exactly what I have wanted."

"Well, some day the tables will be turned. I tell you not to send it; and I hope my father will pay no regard to it if he should get it."

The robber laughed.

"I rather like your courage," he said, "but your protest will be 'tabled,' as they say in Congress. It can't be considered at present. We'll get the eighty thousand first, and let such matters come afterwards."

Of course, Walter had no idea that anything he could say would affect the result; but he felt like doing his whole duty in the premises and following up his line of conduct to the last.

"Now," said Number One, "that letter goes off immediately. Our presiding genius will see it lodged in the mail, and the eighty thousand dollars will be forthcoming."

"I hope not," said Walter.

"So you would rather stay here as long as you live than have your father ransom you?"

"I would rather take my chance," said the boy. "My father should not pay for me if I could help it."

"Where did you get your ideas in this respect?" asked Number One, who used remarkably good language for one of his profession.

"I suppose they were born with me," replied Walter. "I don't remember any time when I wouldn't have thought the same."

"You haven't much respect for the Dick Turpin and Tom King school, I should judge."

"I think you have some reason to judge so."

"You don't believe the world owes you a living?"

"Not unless I earn it."

"You are right there; it owes nobody a living. I make no such hackneyed pretenses. Your father must pay me the eighty thousand dollars because I have the power to compel him."

"But you haven't got it yet, and I hope you won't get it."

"Boy," said the robber, "you will have nothing to fear—*if I get the money.*" And there was an ominous emphasis on the last clause.

What would be done in the opposite case was left for Walter to conjecture. They might keep him prisoner for a very long time, or they might even take his life.

He looked about the strange place, calculating the chances of escape. It seemed a hole among vast loose rocks which had been tumbled together by some natural convulsion, leaving all manner of nooks and sharp turnings.

"It is a real rabbit's burrow," he thought.

"A queer place, isn't it?" said the robber, who followed the glances of the young prisoner's eyes.

"You would hardly know how to get out without a pilot."

"But I know well enough you cannot all live in this hole," replied Walter.

"So, should you ever get back to civilization, you wouldn't know just where to find us again, you think?"

"No; I certainly should not expect to find you here."

"Just so; I think we can afford to sell this burrow for eighty thousand dollars. That is what we expect to get for it."

"You had a dozen horses."

"Yes; and you are wondering where the stable is."

"I don't think that horses would climb these rocks."

"Hardly; but the less questions you ask the better we shall get along."

And Number One, who during this colloquy had placed the forged letter in an envelope, together with some writing of his own, now arose and left the cavern.

Two of the robbers remained, having, no doubt, received directions to keep a good watch on the captive. They were playing cards near the door, and while they were going on with the game, Walter lay down upon a couch, as if tired and sleepy.

CHAPTER VI.

A DIZZY LEAP.

THERE seemed not the least probability of immediate escape, yet the boy was alert for any relaxation of vigilance on the part of his keepers.

They had evidently been engaged at their game for a long time, and were apparently getting weary of it.

At length they gave it up, making a few languid observations upon the dullness of such a life. Then, presently, each took a pamphlet, probably of some trashy literature, and commenced reading to himself.

Walter put on an appearance of great drowsiness—pretending to fight against it, but seeming at last to fall asleep.

The men nodded over their books, losing themselves for a moment or two, then starting and staring around. A faint hope arose in the boy's mind as he noticed this. The door, he believed, was not fastened, and could he once pass the fellows, he would stake all upon a rush for liberty, even if they were then to discover his movement.

Longer and longer grew the cat-naps, but the dependence to be placed upon their continuance was precarious indeed.

"I'll try it," at length he thought; "I don't dare to wait longer; they may rally and keep awake."

He placed his feet carefully upon the ground, but his heart thumped very hard as he did so. As he passed the two men, the book held by one of them slid from the sleeper's hand. Walter was prepared to make a desperate spring forward, in spite of the pistol shots that might follow him, when he perceived that the fellow did not even stir.

"I guess they are both sound asleep," he thought; and now, for the first time, his hope of escape became strong.

To open the door without noise was an operation that made a severe demand on his nerves; but he performed it with a steady hand, and closing it after him, sped away with rapid but stealthy footsteps.

He was now under the open sky, but the passages among the rocks were so tortuous and difficult as to perplex him greatly. What if the two robbers were

WALTER ATTEMPTS AN ESCAPE. See page 30.

to awake and pursue him? What if he were to meet others face to face, while thus leaping or climbing along?

It did not take him long, however, to reach more open ground, though he still had not the least idea of the direction he ought to follow.

"At all events, I am free," he said, "and I mean to keep so. I don't believe they would ever be able to catch me if I were to fall in with ever so many of them. I wish to report at some station as soon as possible, but I don't know how far I may be from any settlement, and I am just as likely to be going the wrong way as the right one."

In this state of uncertainty he continued his course, walking very fast, when suddenly, as he was ascending a ridge partially overgrown with bushes, the sound of a human voice startled him. It was close at hand; and almost instantly the heads of two men appeared among the rocks and scrubby growth in front.

To retreat unobserved was impossible, and Walter settled quietly in his tracks like a rabbit. The men paused a few yards away, standing upon a rock. Of the face of one of them, the boy had a plain view, but that of the other he could not well see at the moment.

"Of course, it will work like a charm," said the first mentioned, as if continuing a conversation. "They will not let the boy remain in our hands a day longer than necessary, I feel very sure of that."

"Ha!" Walter said to himself; "I have heard that voice before, and that within the last two hours. Number One without his mask! Old fellow, I have you now—provided you haven't got *me!* Strait nose, broad between the eyes; and—there, he takes his hat off to fan himself—retreating forehead. O, I shall not forget that head and face! How sharp his eyes

are, and what a smooth-looking villain he is altogether!"

"I'm in hopes everything will go well," remarked the other. "There was a great rumpus about the boy when the stage people reported, and there's no telling what may turn up to interfere with us."

It seemed to Walter that he had somewhere heard *that* voice, also.

"Queer that I should have happened to see Mercer's daughter in the stage," continued the speaker—"and this boy, too. Well, I've paid off that old debt. I told Dayton I'd be even with him for his testimony."

"The boy was surprised to see how you had counterfeited his hand," said Number One. "I told him it was done by the Spirit of the Mountains."

"Some other people have reason to remember that spirit," was the reply. "I wonder what can have become of poor Gerald? Well, I had to do it, you know."

As he spoke, the man turned his face so that Walter had a full view of it. After what he had heard, the sight of that face gave him no surprise, and he said only:

"The old villain! I could see him strung up to the nearest tree! To think of his remonstrating with the robbers and begging them not to carry me off!"

Of course he was the "elderly man" of the stage coach; and no doubt poor little Maud Mercer still remembered him with respect.

Number One and his companion were about moving off when Walter was startled by the sound of footsteps in his rear, and turning, beheld two masked men close upon his track. They saw him as he looked around, but the next moment he had sprung out of their sight like a deer.

"Hello!" they cried to the other, who seemed not to have discovered their approach till now, "stop that boy! stop him! stop him!"

What a race it was! Walter sped around rocks, dived through thickets, leaped over chasms. He was a strong, agile youth, and had often out-jumped and out-run all the boys at school.

His four pursuers spread out to increase their chances, and shouted to confuse him, though they did not fire their guns.

Soon, however, he had so distanced them that they could catch glimpses of him only at brief intervals, though they continued the pursuit, "out-flanking" him in such a manner that he could not turn aside.

The way directly ahead was very difficult; and upon this circumstance they probably fixed their hopes of finally overtaking him. He saw himself suddenly confronted by a high cliff which had been hidden by some tall cedars growing near it; but leaping from crag to crag, he soon managed to gain a shelf-like projection a number of rods wide.

Along this he ran, looking vainly for a place to get higher or lower. It was broken, jagged and dangerous. He saw two of his pursuers behind; but he still hoped for some avenue of escape.

Presently an abrupt turn was reached, so that the robbers were left wholly out of sight.

"It must end soon," he thought, "at some place where I can scramble up or down."

Yet he could see nothing that looked like such an ending.

After passing the turn, he perceived that a mountain torrent was rushing on beneath that part of the cliff where he now was. But how far below him it seemed as it leaped along the gorge!

"I may be in a trap!" he thought, hastily; "those

fellows are close behind ; and if the shelf should run out to nothing, what could I do? I should be caught like a rat in a trap!"

He looked around and saw that the two men in his rear had passed the turn of the rock. Still, however, he sprang forward, hoping for the best, and keeping a sharp eye ahead for some stair of escape either up or down.

"At the worst," he thought, "there is the water. If the rock would only slant closer to it—if it wasn't quite so far below—or if I knew it to be deep enough! Perhaps it is very shallow, and I might go down upon sharp stones!"

Again he looked around.

"I can outrun them—they'll never overtake me while the way keeps open in front!" Such hopeful thoughts as this darted through his mind.

He sprang on, though still not free from the terrible suspicion of a trap. Once more he looked behind ; but as he did so there was a shout right in front that drew his glance from the rear.

He stopped short, with a mental shock that for the moment amounted to despair.

Two of the robbers had come leaping out upon the shelf directly ahead of him! They must have cut across the cliff above, by some path well known to them ; and they had now emerged at a gap which he had been on the very point of reaching!

Both parties of his enemies now slackened their speed and approached at a walk. He was between them, and they were sure of him.

He looked over the shelf and saw the torrent sweeping on more than a hundred feet below, eddying and boiling under the cliff, which arched a little over it. But how narrow it looked from that height! Indeed, it seemed as if in leaping straight outward, one would be in danger of landing beyond it. With

Walter, to think was to decide ; and to decide was to act at once.

"I must do it," he said ; "there is no other hope. The water looks deep, and perhaps I may not strike the bottom very hard." Yet it thrilled him to think of that rush through the air.

The robbers could scarcely believe their eyes as they saw him prepare for the tremendous leap.

"Hold, you youngster!" cried Number One ; "don't be a fool! What are you thinking of?"

A thought of "little Jack, the captain's son," who leaped from the truck of Old Ironsides, flashed like lightning through Walter's mind. It came like an inspiration, as if to tell him that the ordeal would not be fatal.

"I must keep my feet close together," he thought, "with the toes pointed downward."

Without the delay of another moment, he sprang from his foothold, and his body, straight as an arrow, went rushing through the air. He felt himself strike the water and shoot through it to the bottom, but was never able to recollect what followed.

Had the reader stood as a spectator below, he might have seen the robbers creep to the edge of the cliff and peer over.

"There is no chance for him," said Number One, "even if the shock hasn't killed him outright. See! there he floats—but he seems to be stunned. Now he is gone again!"

"Stunned or not," said the elderly man, "he won't be able to get out of that torrent."

"There he is once more," said the other, "away yonder! And there he goes out of sight! Well, it can't be helped—it's better than to have had him escape."

"But our scheme must go on just the same," said the older robber.

"Certainly; and 'twill be all the safer for us. I didn't intend just this, but at all events we shall not have to return him to his friends to tell tales."

"No; we are safe there," was the reply.

And so the cold, calculating outlaws gave up their victim.

CHAPTER VII.

A PAINFUL UNCERTAINTY.

WALTER'S last sensations had been those of suffocation and struggling, and when consciousness began to return, his thoughts were sadly confused.

"Where am I?" he asked himself, "and what has happened to me?"

It seemed to him that he must have met with some dreadful accident; but he had not the least recollection of it.

Soon, however, the remembrance dawned upon him; and, as it did so, a terrible apprehension shot through his mind.

Was he again in the robbers' cave? Surely he had good reason to suppose so from what he could see about him.

It was certainly a cavern of some sort; and though the gloomy room in which he found himself was not the one from which he had evidently escaped, might it not make only another portion of the same fearful den?

No human form was to be seen, but there were lamps burning which revealed the weirdness of the place.

The room was irregular and very large; and Walter was struck by the appearance, in different parts of it, of what he at first took to be living animals.

There were a bear, a puma, a wildcat, and a mountain sheep. What a strange family! Then,

too, perched a few yards from his couch, he saw an immense owl, with great, staring eyes ; while a rattlesnake, not less than seven feet long, occupied a position against the wall of rock, at some height from the floor, as if it had climbed there.

None of these objects, however, appeared to stir ; the snake made no progress along the wall, and the bear uttered no growl. So that Walter, in spite of his feeble and bewildered condition, could not help perceiving that they must be only stuffed specimens. No huge "grizzly" or puma had carried him to its hole among the rocks.

Walter found it difficult to move, and he realized that he was very weak and sore.

"So they have got me, after all," he said, "and no doubt they will take good care that I shall not escape a second time."

The reflection was bitter and humiliating.

"It is too bad!" he thought, "to have them triumph in this manner after all my efforts. If I had not become insensible, I could have kept out of their way."

However, he could not yet think very clearly, or realize his failure as he might have done at another time.

Presently a footstep was heard, and he saw the figure of a man moving about the room.

"There is one of them," he thought. "He has no mask on. I'll take a good look at his face before he discovers that I am awake." And again, feeble as he was, the old idea of a final reckoning and triumph took possession of him.

It seemed as if the mere sight of the robber gave him strength, for it aroused the sense of antagonism, and brought him back to himself.

As the man stood revealed by the lamplight, he was not at all prepossessing in appearance. A full

beard, reaching to his breast, gave his face a look of ferocity, which was increased by the effect of the long, Indian-like hair that floated in a wild mass over his shoulders.

Yet evidently he was not an Indian, for he had the features and complexion of a white man.

His dress consisted of moccasins, buckskin trousers, and blue flannel shirt, without vest or coat. He was, moreover, a muscular and somewhat tall man; and, altogether, he appeared like one who must be an ugly customer at the door of a stage coach, with a dark lantern in one hand and a revolver in the other.

"He is the worst of them all," thought Walter; and his mind reverted in a confused manner to the stories he had read of "Bluebeard." "I guess I am given over to this fellow as punishment for trying to escape. They have the advantage of me now; but they cannot make me help them in their villainy, do what they may."

Still, he felt a great dread of this strange man, as if he were a something worse than a common robber —a wild, hideous being, whom the gang employed as a kind of underground terror, to have charge of of refractory prisoners.

The long-haired keeper approached and looked sharply into the boy's face. He seemed to have been preparing some medicine.

"There's life enough in him," he muttered. "He swallowed that last without knowing it. If I could only get a little of this into him——"

Walter stirred and looked up in the strange face.

"Ah! coming to," said the man. "Boy, take this." And putting an arm under the patient's head, he placed a cup to his lips, which contained a strange, tasteless liquid.

"Your mind's coming right," he said. "Just now,

when I forced some drops down your throat, you didn't know it."

The tone was bluff and hasty, though not really harsh. It did not come up to Walter's conception of "Bluebeard's" voice, and yet it was not a tone to give him much encouragement. The man had spoken much as he might have done to a sick dog.

"They wish to keep me alive," thought Walter, "but I should think this fellow would put on a mask like the rest, if he believes I shall ever get away."

"How do you feel?" asked the man.

"I feel very weak and lame," replied Walter.

"Well, you will feel better soon. You must keep still now."

"Who brought me here," asked Walter.

"I did."

"Where did you find me?"

"In the water."

"What place is this?"

"It is a cave."

"So I thought," replied Walter; and he wondered if this might not be the chief den of the outlaws.

He lay musing upon his situation, and watching his rough companion.

"Yes," he said, "this is another of their holes, and all those twelve horses are stabled here somewhere. Perhaps I am close upon Mr. Mercer's gold, and a great deal of other treasure too. It may be all for the best that I am retaken, for if I had got away I should not have discovered this place."

But the attempt to console himself with the last reflection was not very successful. It was too much a matter of form.

"Is it night?" he finally asked, aloud.

"Yes," replied his guardian.

"How long have I been here?"

"An hour or two."

"Where are Number One and the others?"

"Boy, keep still a moment, will you? I am busy."

He had answered Walter's questions as if wholly preoccupied; and his last reply was petulant and even savage.

"Well," thought our hero, "I will be as independent as you! If you ask me a question, old fellow, I'll tell you I am busy thinking."

He lay for a while longer watching the queer man, and asking himself what good such a person could expect from money, should he get ever so much of it.

Once or twice his host approached him, as if to keep informed of his condition, put his hand on the young patient's forehead, and felt the pulse in his wrist. But he seemed to do it all absently, as if thinking of something else.

"He acts more like a lunatic than a robber," thought Walter; "but I suppose he is studying up some mischief or thinking of some danger. Such fellows must always be uneasy in one way or another."

But in spite of all the boy's efforts at defiance, he still felt what amounted nearly to despair. He saw himself buried in the heart of the mountains, where no friendly hand could reach him save at the will of his villainous persecutors; and under such circumstances it was an agony to think of home and those who were dear to him.

While strong and well, he could fight his way with words, at least, and could be on the watch for any loophole of advantage or escape; but now, disabled as he was, he had only to wait in a weary and dreadful suspense.

In the meantime his keeper proceeded to overhaul a variety of odd-looking articles, apparently of a mechanical nature; and Walter queried as to whether these, too, might not be the proceeds of some rob-

bery. If so, he wondered what use they could be put to by such a man in such a place.

"Oh, I know," he said at last to himself; "he has got some *infernal machine* there, and is trying to perfect it. That's what he must have been thinking of just now when he said he was busy. It may be intended to blow up a bank safe, or a steamboat, or a locomotive—something of that kind in the wind! The next that people will know, some explosion will take place in order that a robbery may be committed."

He watched the man at this kind of work till the sinister countenance grew into his soul like a photograph.

"I shall know him, at all events," he thought; and so now I have three of them in my mind without their masks—three of the head ones, too, I guess. Number One is certainly the leader, and that smooth old fellow of the stage coach must rank next; then this man here neither looks nor acts as if he were one of the lowest. He's shrewd enough—he's no more crazy than I am."

The man seemed wholly absorbed in his work—sometimes loosening a screw or changing the position of a lever; now peering under the suspicious contrivance, and now over it; now lifting it from the table, and now replacing it; and all the while with brow contracted and every indication of troublesome thought.

Here, perhaps, was an invention which might be set to do a giant's work; but an evil work, indeed, it must be in such hands.

After a while he suddenly started up, as if all at once remembering his prisoner.

"Wide awake yet, eh?" he said, coming to Walter's side.

"Yes."

"How do you feel?"
"Not so bad as I did."
"Do you want anything?"
"No."
"Not in much pain?"
"No; only sore and weak."
"Here, take this"—and he presented some small liquid potion which the boy swallowed unhesitatingly. It seemed to Walter that what he had at first taken had done him good; and then, of course, the outlaws could have no motive for giving him poison, at least for the present.

Shortly afterwards, he found himself very drowsy. Two or three times he rallied, and each time saw the mysterious workman at his task; but at length the tired young eyes refused to open, and the lad forgot his unhappiness in a deep, quiet sleep.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN INCIDENT THAT WROUGHT A CHANGE.

Walter felt very languid upon awaking, but his mind had grown clearer and stronger. His companion of the previous evening was still alone with him, and he wondered that no others of the gang made their appearance. Perhaps this, too, was merely an outpost, like the other place he had seen, and the real hold of the robbers might be at a wide distance from it.

He detected the fragrant odor of coffee and the smell of broiled venison, but could see nothing of any appliance for cookery.

"How now?" said his gruff jailor. "You feel better this morning, I think."

"Yes, a little," replied Walter, surprised that the man should have used a single word more than necessary.

"Sore all over, of course."

"Yes, I feel as if I had been run through a flour mill."

"Well, I'll bring you some coffee."

"I wonder that he should care how I feel," thought Walter; "but somehow he don't look as savage as he did last night. Here comes the coffee. I must drink that to keep alive, if a robber did make it."

The beverage revived him greatly.

"Now," said the man, "get up and let me see what you look like. Don't be afraid; I won't hurt you."

"I am not afraid," replied Walter, "but it hurts me to move."

"Well, out you come—here, let me help you."

Walter got out upon the floor, his companion at first supporting him. He was lame from top to toe, but felt stronger with each movement.

"There," said the man, "move about and limber yourself." And turning away abruptly, he disappeared for the moment. Returning, he set a number of dishes upon a rude sort of table that stood by the wall, between the table and the grizzly bear.

Walter thought the odor of the venison very tempting; but his appetite failed after a few mouthfuls, for he was not well enough to relish an ordinary meal. His companion, however, ate heartily.

Very few words were spoken during the repast, the strange personage seeming all the while moody and preoccupied.

"You must keep quiet for a day or two," he remarked, as he finished breakfast. "Lie down when you like, and get up when you are tired of lying down."

"But when am I to have my liberty?"

"Have your liberty?"

"Yes, that is what I would be glad to know."

"Oh, in a few days; you won't be a prisoner long, if things work well."

"I could escape from this man," thought Walter, "if I wasn't so disabled. Perhaps by to-morrow I may be able to walk, at least, if I can't run."

If there had been any doubt in his mind in regard to the connection of this singular person with the robber gang, it was now set wholly at rest. It did not occur to him that there might be a misunderstanding. He would have asked a question or two more, but the strange individual, without the least further notice of him, arose abruptly and went about some business of his own.

Walter hobbled to the couch and lay down upon it, as this was his easiest position; and then in the silence he watched the long-haired man at some mysterious occupation, though not that of the night before.

After a time the stalwart robber arose and walked the room, precisely as if he supposed himself its only occupant.

"He must be a lunatic, sure enough," thought Walter—"a crazy robber. But then would the gang leave a crazy man here to manage things? I think not."

After all, he could not help seeing that his jailor had nothing of an insane look. He simply acted queerly.

At length, seeming to remember Walter's presence, he stopped in his walk and looked at him thoughtfully.

"So they will come in upon me," he said, "get where I will. Boy, I wish you had kept away. How did you come here?"

"You said that you brought me," replied Walter.

"Yes; but how came you in that stream?"

"What is he at now?" thought Walter. "Is it

possible that he don't know all about it? Well, I'll tell him no more than he asks." "I went into it from a rock," he answered.

"Fell in—I see. But how came you in this part of the country alone?"

Walter was puzzled. What object could the man have in pretending ignorance? "Has he not just spoken," he thought, "as if he knew me to be a prisoner?" However, nothing could be lost by non-committal.

"I was out on a school vacation," he said.

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"A boy of sixteen here in these mountains! Were you lost?"

"Yes."

"What is your name?"

"Walter Dayton?"

"Where is your home?"

"In Sacramento."

"And so you are on my hands—a prisoner here."

"*Prisoner* again!" thought Walter. "He asks all these questions, and yet he knows just how it is all the time. But then—hold, he may belong to another gang; I never thought of that."

The man turned away as if vexed with himself for having manifested any interest in the matter, and again fell into a study over something of the mechanical kind.

"I am puzzled more than ever," said Walter to himself. "I will ask him about the robbers outright, and see what he will say."

He would ask nothing, however, till the man should seem less absorbed in his work; so he lay and watched him, thinking that, after all, he had not a bad face. It was that long beard and hair which gave him his look of fierceness.

Presently he observed the workman pause and look up in a listening attitude. There was a long narrow rent in the rock, nearly over the man's head, and just then a few bits of gravel fell through it and rattled on the table at which he sat.

"They are coming," thought Walter, "Number One and the rest of them. I can hear them on the cliff outside."

There was, indeed, a slight noise, as of some living object making its way down the side of the rock.

The long-haired man rose softly, motioning Walter to be silent. Then, taking a double-barreled gun, he noiselessly disappeared outside. It was the first time that the lad had perceived the way of exit. Full of curiosity, he arose and attempted to walk to the door, though the movement pained him.

In a few minutes he heard a harsh growl, and then the report of a gun. This was followed by a startling roar ; and Walter forgot his crippled condition as he hurried out to see what was taking place.

The sight he encountered was a thrilling one. Stretched prone upon the ground lay the man of the cave, while over him stood a huge cinnamon bear, with both fore paws on his breast.

The gun, of which one barrel only had been discharged, was lying a few feet off, and behind the enraged animal.

Walter shouted to divert the bear's attention, and losing all sense of lameness and weakness, plunged desperately out of the cave.

It was his object to get possession of the gun ; but the attempt would be more perilous than his leap from the cliff. It would expose him to almost certain death, as the bear would undoubtedly leave its first victim to attack him. Yet a human life was at stake, and the case required instant action.

As he passed close to the bear, it glared upon him

with fury in its small black eyes, and seemed on the point of rushing forward.

To pick up the gun without being instantly torn in pieces appeared almost impossible, but a quick motion might accomplish it.

Walter's hand flew out and snatched the weapon; while the bear, wheeling about, rose on its hind legs ready to clutch him in its embrace.

The report of the gun and the roar of the furious brute were simultaneous. At first the boy felt himself lost, for the bear sprang upon him with a force that threw him flat on the ground. Scrambling up, however, he saw that the creature was beyond doing further harm, having died almost instantly.

As to the man, he was so badly injured that Walter's assistance was required to enable him to walk. Once within the cavern, he flung himself upon a couch, and then in a feeble voice directed his young companion what to do in the case.

All the while he looked into the boy's face with a grateful expression, and his whole manner appeared to be changed.

CHAPTER IX.

A BETTER UNDERSTANDING.

Walter found the cavern well stocked with curatives, and the man, lying pallid and helpless, instructed him how to apply them.

The poor boy had himself been hurt by the last effort of the bear, so that had there been no great necessity for action, he would have felt compelled to lie very quiet. As it was, however, he gave scarcely a thought to his own condition, but seizing upon this or that support, hobbled briskly about, feeling his disability become less with the forced exercise.

"I saw that the bear hurt you," said the man. "I

AN ENCOUNTER WITH A DANGEROUS ENEMY. See page 48.

thought you were as good as dead when he made that last spring, and I could not help feeling sorry you had not let him kill me instead of exposing yourself. You are a noble boy to risk your own life for another, and that, too, under such terrible circumstances. I don't think you can know what fear is."

"I hadn't time to be afraid," said Walter; "I was thinking of what I had to do. One thing at a time, you know—I meant to kill the bear, and I couldn't have done it if I had thought about myself."

"That's true," said the wounded man, "you are a keen philosopher for a boy."

"Perhaps I follow instinct," said Walter.

"Yes; but instinct is sometimes the best of all guides."

"Can this man be a robber?" thought Walter. "How he has changed! He is not the same person! And yet he *must* be one of the robbers, for he talked about my being a prisoner. But then, didn't he seem to talk the other way, too, as if he knew nothing of how I came here? I can't understand it."

He thought of saying something on this point, but would not do so just now. The man seemed grievously injured and might die. And Walter saw the possibility of at last finding himself alone in that vast cavern in the presence of death.

"I could hobble away now," he reflected, "and take my chance among the mountains; but wouldn't I be a coward to leave this man as he is, to suffer alone, and perhaps to die? No; I'll stay and see it out with him. At all events, I'll do so unless I discover something further. He *can't* be a robber; he don't look like one in his face; he don't talk like one."

Walter suddenly found himself grown into a nurse, and there was a kind of satisfaction in the discovery that he was capable of being one. Getting about as well as he could, he rummaged for bandages, lini-

ment and internal restoratives, and felt the better for his sense of responsibility.

His mind was occupied with the good he could do, and should any base treachery be his reward, it would not be *his* fault. So he went on with a real interest in the case before him, as if it were the only thing to be considered.

The man was at length comparatively comfortable, though after the first involuntary outflow of feeling, he said little more.

"I wonder if he is going to be moody again," mused Walter, with a feeling of disappointment.

"Do you feel tolerably easy now?" he asked.

"Yes, tolerably."

"I am glad of it."

"I know you are."

"It is the first time I ever attempted to do up a wound."

"I shall have to keep you till I get better."

"Keep me prisoner?"

"Yes."

"You said I was a prisoner before."

"O, but that was on your own account. You know you are not fit to travel."

"So no one else knows I am here?"

"Certainly not."

"You live here all alone, then?"

"Yes."

Walter's heart felt lightened of a great load.

"There," he said to himself, "I am sure at last that he does not belong to the gang. He may be a robber on his own hook, but I will say nothing about that at present. I feel now as if I could afford to leave off asking him questions, and just go on thinking."

The change from the former state of suspense brought a feeling that was almost happiness. Now

he would no longer have to listen for the footsteps of Number One and his associates. He had only to consider how best he might get out from the mountains when he should again be able to travel. The grimness of the cavern was softened, and even the rattlesnake upon the wall appeared less hideous than at first.

The wounded man was getting drowsy, perhaps from the effect of something which had been administered, and after a time he fell asleep.

Upon his awakening, the shock to his nervous system appeared to have passed away, so that he was able to sit up. Much of his reserve was now gone, and he seemed to regard Walter with great interest. He had "taken to him," so to speak, and began to question him.

"You say you were alone," he said.

"Yes, at the time of my accident."

"Did you come into the mountains with company?"

"Yes; I came with a *company* of robbers!"

And Walter looked into the man's face to see what effect the revelation would produce.

"Robbers! how came that about?"

"They attacked a stage coach I was in, and after plundering it they carried me off with them in order to make my father ransom me."

"How should they have known anything about you?"

"Oh, there was an oldish man in the stage who asked me some questions about myself, and it was he who told them of me. He appeared to know my father."

"Your father is rich, no doubt."

"Yes; and, besides, I think this man has a grudge against him."

"Well, where did they take you?"

"To a cave among the rocks; but I haven't the least idea where it is."

"And you escaped?"

"Yes; they tried to make me sign a letter to my father, begging him to ransom me. I refused to do it, and then they counterfeited my hand and forged a letter. I found afterwards that it was done by the same man I had seen in the stage."

"Forged, you say?"

"Yes, and it was done to perfection. I heard one of the robbers tell another that the one who did it could fool the president of a bank."

"Forged your name! Counterfeited your handwriting!"

"Yes; I suppose he must have found a scrap of my writing which I didn't know I had about me."

"An oldish man—how did he look?"

"He had large eyes, a hooked nose, and a very wide head."

"So he was one of the robbers?"

"Yes; a robber in disguise; he appeared like a gentleman."

"Did you make your escape from them and afterwards get lost?"

"I got out of the cave, but pretty soon I came upon the oldish man and another that the robbers called Number One. They didn't see me at first, but two others came up and discovered me where I was hidden, and then the whole four attempted to catch me. I dodged them, and at last jumped off a high cliff into that torrent where you must have found me."

"So the old man asked you questions in the stage?"

"Some few; not many; and rather carelessly, as I thought. There was a girl in the stage whose father had just been robbed of a hundred thousand

dollars in gold—all the property he had. He is a Mr. Mercer."

"Mercer—a Mr. Mercer—and where is his home?"

"I don't know. His daughter did not say."

"So you think the old man of the stage coach was the one who forged the letter?"

"Oh, yes; I heard them talking about it afterwards. He wasn't very old—I should say he was about fifty."

"Had a grudge against your father, you think?" said the man.

"I heard him say something about getting even with him; and he spoke of some one besides whom he called 'Gerald,' as near as I could understand."

"What did he say of him?"

"I have forgotten the expression he used, but it seemed as if 'Gerald' was some one whom he had wronged."

"The villainous gang!" said the long-haired man, looking intensely excited. "They burrow in the mountains like rattlesnakes!"

His face had a fierce, wild look, that was startling in its suggestion of insanity.

"And what do you think of *me?*" he asked, presently.

"I was doubtful when I found myself here," answered Walter. "I thought——"

"You thought me a robber, like the rest."

"Well, I did—I——"

"Yes, I felt that you did; and you don't know but I *am* one."

"I'll risk it," said Walter.

"You mean that you *must* risk it."

"I mean that I am not afraid you intend me any harm."

"And you don't feel yourself a prisoner?"

"No; except in the way you mentioned."

"That is right; we are prisoners to each other for the present."

And the strange man, weak and pale, threw himself upon the couch.

CHAPTER X.

A CONVERSATION AND A VISITOR.

After a while, Walter could not resist the temptation of going out to look at the dead bear.

The animal lay where it had fallen, a grim looking object, surely, with its heavy body and stout legs and paws.

"To-morrow I will see if I can get off the skin," thought our young hero; "but I am too sore and lame to-day. I think that fellow would weigh more than five hundred pounds."

Examining the surroundings of the cave, he saw that its entrance was so hidden by trees and rocks that it was not likely to be detected by a stranger even when open, while it was rendered still more secret by a door so ingeniously contrived as to seem like Nature's own work.

Earth and rock were intermingled about the place, and vines and trees took root here and there in such a way that no one would have suspected the existence of a cave below them.

Walter, while within, had observed that the air and sunlight entered through a number of rents, and he now saw how easily these narrow crevices could be covered when necessary with bark or other material.

The spot was high above a neighboring gorge, and through this there coursed a rapid stream, which he imagined might be the very one into which he had leaped, though here it had so widened as to lose something of its force.

"If I could only get word to my father, so as to prevent him from making any arrangement with the robbers, how I would love to remain here for a time," he said, "it is all so wild and strange."

True, his father might require that he should be produced before putting the money in the robbers' hands; and thus the eighty thousand dollars might be saved—but at what an expense of feeling! He would be supposed to be dead, and the sufferings of his parents would be dreadful.

Yet his present condition rendered a long journey out of the question, and even if perfectly well, how would he be able to find his way through a mountainous wilderness, so vast and difficult?

His most trying disability was a sprain in one of his ankles, for it acted as a merciless fetter to the slightest movement, to say nothing of a forty-mile tramp over the mountains. He saw that he must yield to the inevitable, and he did so with his usual decision.

He re-entered the cave, taking care to close the outlet behind him with the screen of woven twigs and moss which he had observed as serving for a door.

The wounded man asked him to sit down by the side of his couch.

"Walter," he said, "for you say that is your name, did you ever see a *hermit?*"

"No, sir, not that I am aware of."

Somehow it seemed easy and natural to use the "sir" as a handle to the "no."

"Well, you see one now," was the answer.

"And have you lived here all alone for a long time?"

"Yes, for a number of years."

"And you never go to the settlements?"

"No, never."

"But you have coffee, and flour, and sugar, and medicine and mechanical tools—and—*gas!* I don't see how you get them if you never leave the neighborhood."

The hermit smiled.

"No wonder you include *gas*," he said, "for you must have observed that I use a great deal. Nature provides that. I get it from the earth itself. As to the other articles, perhaps you will learn before long how I get them.

"And do you never get tired of staying here?"

"Yes; but I can stay nowhere else."

"I would like to live here a while, but not always," said Walter.

"Heaven grant that you may never find it necessary!"

"I wonder what the necessity can be in his case!" thought Walter.

"Your father," continued the hermit, "is Mr. Walter Dayton, of San Francisco, I presume."

"Yes, sir," replied the boy, in some surprise; "are you acquainted with him?"

"I have heard of him." But the look and manner told that he might have said more.

"Of course, you must wish to know me by some name," he added. "You may call me Percy—Mr. Percy."

"In what way did you find me?" asked Walter.

"Oh, I found you caught in a fallen tree-top, where you had been swept by the torrent. Then I made a raft of dry cedar limbs with my hatchet, large enough to hold us both, and so got you here; for the same stream runs close to this place. We floated for two or three miles, but I saw all the while that you were alive, though you did not realize anything."

"I can never repay you for your good deed, sir."

"You have repaid me already. You have done what not one boy in ten thousand would have had the courage to do. You must have thought me a very gruff fellow at first, and I ask your pardon for having appeared so."

"But you thought it necessary."

"No, I did not *think;* I *felt.* We should not always follow our feelings."

"Oh, I know one must get gloomy," said Walter, "when he is shut up alone;" and he thought with a shudder of his own feelings when shut in the cell of the robbers' cave.

"The elderly man you spoke of," said the hermit, "you heard no name given him?"

"I am not sure that I did," replied Walter. "While I was confined, I heard a name used that sounded like 'Old Eli,' and I now think that it was this man who was speaking, and that he was applying the name to himseif."

The hermit's face took on a fierce, vindictive look, as if he made the case his own. "The scoundrel!" he exclaimed, and then for some minutes remained silently thinking.

"Walter," he said at length, "if these villains could be brought to justice, there might be more than money recovered. Gold is of small consequence."

"But Mr. Mercer would not think so."

"Certainly not. Mr. Mercer has lost *gold*—I—but was the girl you met in the stage interesting?"

"Very. And she was the prettiest girl I ever saw. I am sure all the passengers must have been taken with her appearance."

"She probably looks as—well, a good and pretty girl is a beautiful object in a boy's eyes. Did you learn her first name?"

"Yes; it was Maud."

"That is one of the best names in the world."

"I think so, too," said Walter.

"No doubt. But those robbers—I wonder what hole they are hiding in? No one knows how many unexplored caverns there are among the mountains."

"Does this cave reach in much farther than I can see?" asked Walter.

"Yes, it reaches, perhaps, for miles. But I have lived here until very lately without any suspicion of the fact. A short time since I pried away a flat stone and saw an opening behind it. Then I removed a quantity of earth, and discovered that I had been living in the mere vestibule of a cavern instead of the cavern itself."

"And did you explore it?"

"I did so as far as possible with the means at hand, but I came to a large subterranean lake and was obliged to stop."

"You needed a boat," said Walter, greatly interested.

"Yes; I have since made a canoe of birch bark, but have not yet launched it. I intend to do so soon, however."

"And you think it reaches for miles. Oh, how I should delight to navigate such a lake! Is the roof quite high?"

"Yes, and glittering with crystals. It is one of the most remarkable caves in the world."

"Some time," said Walter, "I will come here, if you have no objection, and take a trip in your canoe."

"I shall be glad to have you. I wish you could remain and do so now, but of course your parents must not be left in suspense longer than necessary."

"No, sir," said Walter; "I am very anxious about them."

"It is as much as either of us can do to get about

house at present," said the hermit, "but wait a few days and we will see what is to be done. You will come out right, I am sure."

"I shall come out right if I can be the means of breaking up this gang of robbers and recovering some of their plunder."

"Any party of men who will hunt them down shall have all the assistance I can give," said Mr. Percy. "I had no idea that—well, your story has set me to thinking."

Walter could hardly credit his senses as he looked upon the long haired man during this discourse, and thought of his manner a few hours previous. The society and sympathy of a mere boy had been to him what the rain is to the parched ground.

"We will hope for the best," added the hermit, "but it will be a difficult undertaking. Your affair, however, will have done good—it will take something from the mystery. You will be able to furnish a better clue than any one else. I should be glad to have you report to that pretty girl of the stage coach, in just the mauner you would like!"

"Thank you, sir," said Walter.

That evening, though in pain and limping awkwardly, he insisted upon cooking the simple supper, and was tolerably successful. It consisted of venison, "short-cakes," and tea.

Both felt invigorated by the repast, for their disabilities were chiefly in their limbs.

At night they slept on separate couches made of dry moss, over which bear skins were spread, making the beds all that could be desired.

"Did you hear the snarling outside of the cave last night?" asked the hermit, as they awoke in the morning.

"No, sir, I slept very sound; what was it?"

"Only a pack of wolves. They were at work on

that dead bear. Probably they have saved us the trouble of disposing of the carcass."

"I was thinking I would like to try my hand at skinning it," said Walter.

"Well, you will find nothing but the larger bones, you may be sure. The skin is gone with the rest, and I would wager something that there is not so much as a toe nail left on the ground."

Both hobbled out to the scene of the wolfish revel, and, sure enough, only a few bones remained as relics of poor Bruin. They were picked so clean and had been so polished by the hungry teeth, that they fairly glistened. No two of them remained together, but all were widely distributed.

"Wolves are great scavengers," said the hermit.

"Yes," replied Walter, "I was wondering what we were to do with the bear's body."

"Well, you see we have nothing to dispose of but the bones. This is the way they clean up my door-yard."

They re-entered the cave and commenced preparations for breakfast.

Presently, to Walter's surprise, he saw the curious door very gently removed, and a human figure make its appearance at the entrance. His first thought was of the robbers. Might they not have caught sight of him without, and thus discovered his retreat?

Carefully closing the portal, the figure advanced with all the silence of a spirit. It was that of an athletic young man, with a remarkably grave face. Walter started and stood on the defensive.

"Good morning, sir," he said, by way of experiment.

There was no answer; but the man stepped forward in his noiseless moccasins, looking about him inquiringly, as if for the master of the place, the

hermit happening just at that moment to be out of sight.

"Take a seat, sir," said Walter.

But the figure simply held up one finger, with the same inquiring look.

"O, I see—he wants Mr. Percy," said Walter to himself, and he pointed to a nook of the cave. But just then the hermit hobbled into view, clapping both hands upon his breast as a sign of welcome.

CHAPTER XI.

A PANTOMIME.

Between the master of the cavern and the silent stranger, there took place a sign-dialogue so rapid as to remind Walter of the play of "heat lightning." It seemed wonderful that either could understand the other, yet there seemed not be the least difficulty in this respect.

Our hero was somewhat acquainted with the sign language, and in this pantomime he fancied that he could read, on the hermit's part, a complete history of the events of the past few days. There were the stage-coach and the robbers ; there were the imprisonment and the escape ; there were the leap from the cliff, the rescue from the stream, and the adventure with the bear.

A quick motion or two told the tale of the wounds received and the present inability to travel, and a rapid drawing of the right forefinger across the palm of the left hand, showed the desire to communicate with friends by letter.

The hermit at length turned to Walter, who had all the while stood an intensely interested spectator.

"You were wondering," he said, "how I obtained my flour, sugar, medicine and other articles. I thought it unnecessary to explain at the time—but

you see the '*how*' before you. This deaf and dumb youth is the only person besides yourself who has the least knowledge of my whereabouts or even of my existence. He brings me whatever I desire. Sometimes he employs a horse, but to-day he has come on foot, as he had only a few light articles to bring."

"And has he never told any one of you?"

"Never, I am sure."

"He must be very faithful."

"He *is* faithful; he would give his life for mine, poor fellow!"

Walter regarded the mute figure with increased interest.

"Now," continued the hermit, "write what you will. He will be your mail carrier. You will have no difficulty in making known your safety, and can easily put your father upon his guard against any trick of the robbers. Let me introduce you to Ralph."

"So Ralph is a deaf and dumb man," said Walter, after shaking hands with that individual.

"Yes," replied the hermit, "and I like him all the better for it, though, of course, he could reveal my secret if he would, as surely as if he could speak."

"You feel as if he would not let it out by accident, I suppose, seeing that he cannot talk."

"Yes, there is something in that. I see that you will have to tell your folks of me—that is unavoidable."

"But I can ask them not to inform others."

"I should choose that you would do so, by all means."

"I will remember. But if we are to bring the robbers to justice——"

"I know what you mean—it may be difficult to assist justice and remain unknown at the same time."

"Perhaps it might be managed, though," said Walter.

"Perhaps—but we will see."

Breakfast being ready, the three sat down to it, the silent messenger eating with all the relish given by a long mountain tramp. He had the night before, as he signified, slept under the open sky, with the earth for a pillow—for so Walter understood the quick upward and downward pointing, accompanied with an inclination of the head.

Our hero now rapidly scribbled a letter to his father, detailing his adventures and the plot of the robbers.

"I am safe now," he wrote, "and as you have nothing to fear on my account, you may perhaps succeed in entrapping them or at least make some discovery that shall help to bring them to justice. Most of all," he added, "I wish to get hold of that old villain who was so good to me in the stage. Wouldn't it be glorious if we could recover Mr. Mercer's gold? Only to think of it, that they should have taken everything he had, and left him a poor man. I'm glad now that they took me, for I should know some of them by sight—two of them, at least—and perhaps this might help a little."

His letter was a long one, for he had much to say; and after remarking that he would have to remain with the hermit until better able to travel, he concluded by describing Ralph, who would deposit the missive in the nearest post-office, as the only person capable of being a guide to the place in case of necessity.

This duty performed, he felt much relieved. Mr. Percy and himself had now only to get well at their leisure, and as the former was already considerably better, while his own ankle was less troublesome than the day before, he believed that there was no longer

any grave cause for anxiety, and his mind was now comparatively easy.

After resting a few hours, Ralph started on his return, making a grave gesture of good by at the door.

"What a walker he must be," said Walter.

"Yes, he could easily out-travel a horse on a long journey," replied the hermit.

"He has walked forty miles," remarked Walter, "and now he is to walk back."

"But he takes it leisurely," said Mr. Percy. "He will make a camp for himself to-night, and reach the post-office to-morrow forenoon."

"It seems to me I should like to travel just in that way," said Walter.

"Yes, there is a charm in such a hardy life," said Mr. Percy.

"Last winter I read 'Walden,' and I can't help thinking how Mr. Thoreau would have enjoyed being *here*."

"Ah, you have read Henry D. Thoreau, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you have read the works of a true thinker. No doubt you and I shall agree very well together."

"Mr. Thoreau seems to make company of his *beans*."

"Yes; he believes in making the most of simple things."

"Yet he would have loved these mountains."

"Oh, yes; yet he made mountains for himself, and took them home with him."

"I suppose he had never suffered any great wrong," said Walter, suggestively.

"No; he could have *his* hermitage very near mankind; he was a happy man." And the hermit's face darkened as he relapsed into thought.

CHAPTER XII.

A SUGGESTIVE SPECTACLE.

WALTER knew very well that his father would come in search of him, as the hermit had given Ralph permission to guide Mr. Dayton to the spot in case the request should be made.

"I am sorry," he thought, "that I shall not be able to remain here long enough to explore the cave, but then if the robbers are to be hunted up, the sooner it is done the better. I will never rest while there is a chance of finding them, if I have to rouse up all the police in California."

His ankle continued to improve, and Mr. Percy's injuries also grew much better, so that in a day or two both were able to move with no great discomfort. The cave contained a variety of books, which our hero found very entertaining, and the hermit, though at intervals sad and moody, was upon the whole an interesting companion, whose conversation helped to pass the time pleasantly.

His long hair still gave him an odd, wild look, but his face, though stern, was far from being a disagreeable one.

At times he would suddenly return to the "infernal machine" upon which Walter had at first seen him at work, and perplex himself with its complications. But now it seemed no longer demoniac in the boy's eyes.

"It is of no consequence," said his eccentric friend, "but it gives employment to thought; I love to see what I can do."

"It seems very ingenious," said Walter, "but I am not mechanic enough to have the least idea of its

"It will never have any use. It is the work of a man in the bowels of the earth."

A number of other queer inventions were bestowed here and there in the recesses of the room, showing that the hermit-workman had busied himself much with the possibilities of invention.

"He may be just the least bit insane on this point," thought Walter. "I have heard of such people."

But it was the subterranean lake—the underground world, with its mysteries—that most occupied his thoughts, and the sight of the canoe which Mr. Percy had prepared, contributed still further to inflame his imagination and increase the impatience he felt to recover his usual strength of limb.

"Now," said the hermit, one bright morning, "we will have some fish. It is about time, I think, to change our fare."

"And do you catch fish in the stream?" asked Walter.

"O yes; a plenty of them—pike and perch and pickerel. I have bait always at hand—any amount of worms to be had for the turning of a flat stone."

The proposition delighted Walter exceedingly. The preparations were soon made, and the hermit led the way to a little nook beside the torrent, where the waters gathered in an eddy as they swept around a projecting rock which broke the force of the current.

Above were the boughs of a gigantic oak, from which depended huge curtains of moss that almost touched the rock beyond, though they did not interfere with the free use of the rod in the calm little pool.

"Here," said Mr. Percy, "the fish come to rest. This place is very deep, and as still as a well."

Walter dropped his hook a little below the surface,

and almost instantly detected a gleaming shape darting toward it.

There was no nibbling, no toying with the bait. The sensation communicated through the line was as of a stroke delivered—and then what a pull!

The line sped out, swerving to right and left, and cutting the water like a knife. What a solid, substantial strength was taking it over the reel!

"It is a monster," said Mr. Percy; "be careful now, and do nothing hastily."

Walter felt all the excitement of a whalesman fast to a hundred-barrel "square-head."

The fish was "game" to perfection. A dozen times it went to the bottom, and as often threw itself sheer out of the water. Sometimes it came to the angler's very feet, but only to shoot away till it passed almost beyond the rock.

At length, however, it yielded, lying still at the surface of the water, and was lifted in upon the bank.

"What is it?" asked Walter.

"A pickerel," said Mr. Percy, "but a much larger one than I ever saw before—a real giant of the stream."

He drew from his pocket an apparatus of his own construction, hooked it under the gills of the fish, and lifted the scaly prize from the ground.

"Let's see," he said; "seven—eight—nine—ten—eleven—twelve—yes—twelve pounds and two ounces!"

It was a fish worthy of a Sierra Nevada stream, where, for aught Walter knew, the bed of the torrent might be paved with gold.

"Now I will try my luck against yours," said Mr. Percy, as he dipped his line.

The result was a trout weighing two pounds.

It was scarcely landed when Walter lifted another pickerel, and flung it gracefully to the bank. It weighed four pounds and a half.

"I shall be dreadfully beaten," said Mr. Percy,

laughing. "The spirit of old Izaak Walton seems to be guiding your rod. However, I am very glad of your success. Now for another trial."

As they were about to throw off their lines, their attention was arrested by a tramping sound on the opposite bank, and stooping so as to look under the curtain of moss, they saw a cavalcade of eight horsemen approaching the stream.

The bank was here so low that the water was nearly on a level with it, so that the horses without difficulty waded in and drank. *They were all of a bay color.*

"The robbers!" whispered Walter, "the very men and horses!"

"Are you sure?" asked the hermit.

"Yes," said Walter, "quite sure. Number One is among them, and so is the old villain of the stage coach. I should know them anywhere."

"Old—where? which? Point him out to me."

"He is the furthest out on their right, as they stand," answered the boy under his breath, "and the next to him is Number One."

"I see," said the hermit; "yes, yes; I see. Ah, if I had but the power to follow them straight from this spot—to follow them right up!"

"They *shall* be followed up," Walter whispered, "if not from here."

The horsemen talked with each other, and pointed up and down the stream. They evidently wished to cross it, but did not like the strong current. On the calm morning air every word they spoke could be distinctly heard by the two secret listeners.

"It will shorten our way a great deal," said Number One, "to cross here."

"Yes," said the elderly man, "and it's the best place for miles. There is a good place to land, near that old mossy tree, and then we can follow the gorge yonder and go straight on."

"The same voice that pleaded with the robbers not to take 'the poor boy' away—not to 'do such a cruel wrong,'" whispered Walter to his companion.

"They will be very near us," said the hermit, but we are perfectly secure. They will not see us. But to think of hiding from such wretches! To be helpless—and those villains at large!"

His manner showed strong excitement.

"Be careful, father," called Number One, apparently speaking to the elderly man, "there's power in this current."

"'Father'!" repeated Walter in astonishment, "he calls him 'father!'"

"Yes," replied the hermit, without the least appearance of surprise.

"Never fear for me," answered the elderly man. "Old Eli can ride with the best of you, if he *isn't* mountain bred."

"That's the name I heard!" whispered Walter; "I was right."

"O, yes," said the hermit, "no doubt of it. They are a fine pair—father and son!"

"Have you ever seen them before? Do you know them?" questioned the boy eagerly.

"Yes, Walter; but no matter now. Ask nothing. From this moment we go hand in hand. Poor Mercer! I had no idea of the real condition of things."

"Our time will come," said Walter, fiercely, "just as sure as we live! I am so glad you intend to join me in the work!"

The men walked their horses into the stream in a line abreast of each other, and then the snorting animals, getting beyond their depth, swam desperately for the bank ahead of them.

The line was soon confused by the rush of the torrent. The old man lost his hat, and came near losing himself, but recovered his balance and followed his

WALTER AND THE HERMIT MAKE AN ALARMING DISCOVERY. See page 69.

associates. The horses jostled against each other, and whinnied in their impatience to get ashore.

"Oh, that old bald pate!" said the hermit. "It has haunted me for"—but he paused and watched the dripping cavalcade scramble up the bank.

"It was above here that we lost the boy," said Number One. "I don't wonder that he couldn't get out; the current is swifter up there."

The horses' feet clattered upon the stony earth, and in a few minutes the robbers were out of sight in the deep gorge.

CHAPTER XIII.

SUSPENSE.

THE sport of the morning was forgotten in the more exciting spectacle just witnessed, and the anglers presently returned to the cave, there to talk over the matter most at heart, or to employ themselves in ways which to Walter at least had the charm of novelty.

The tail of the big pickerel trailed upon the ground as the boy carried it up the hill; and he could not help recalling a score of his acquaintances who would go into ecstasies over his prize could they see him thus tugging it along.

But how small a portion of it could be turned to account with only two at the table. Nor was there any one to show it to but the single friend who already knew all about it.

> "Discount what others feel, what others think,
> All pleasures sicken and all glories sink."

He dressed it handsomely, however, taking a boy's pride in displaying his proficiency at the work.

"You are not at all awkward; I see that you know what a fish is," said Mr. Percy.

"I have done such things before," replied Walter,

"when I have been on picnics about San Francisco Bay."

How nice and tempting it looked! Yet enough was reserved for dinner, the rest going to the wolves, who would be sure to leave nothing to taint the air.

"It is strange," said Mr. Percy, "that after I have lived here for years, knowing nothing of the existence of this gang of robbers, they should present themselves just now at the very moment of your telling me about them."

"It is the same with everything, I think," said Walter. "If a person mis-spells a word, he finds himself mis-spelling a dozen other words right away; and if he hears an odd name, that he never knew of before, he'll find it everywhere after that."

"You are a pretty good observer," remarked the hermit; "I have noticed the same thing, though I don't know why it should be so."

"There's no way of knowing whether the fellows were just going out from their hiding place or getting back to it," said Walter, "but I guess they were getting back. You say the rock I leaped from is on this side of the stream, so the place where I was confined must be on this side too, though I don't know where. Their main den may be close by it or a long distance from it."

"I think they take good care to conceal their trail," said Mr. Percy.

"Yes, sir, and probably the men wouldn't be found near their horses."

"Are you quite sure the place you were in is not their main resort?"

"Not entirely sure, but I think it was not. Only a few of them halted there that night when we arrived, and besides I heard something said of another place."

"They are a precious lot, surely!"

"Yes; but I feel almost sure of them now. Something tells me that they are getting more and more in our power. When they spoke this morning of my being drowned, how little they thought I was listening!"

"That old man!" exclaimed Mr. Percy, with a look and manner which recalled Walter's first impression of the hermit, "that wretched old man! I can hardly believe my eyes!"

And throwing back his long hair, he walked the cavern as if deeply troubled.

"He must have done you some great wrong," said Walter.

"Ask me no questions—sometime you may know! I do not feel like telling the story now. But somehow what I have just seen has set me thinking of possibilities."

"I think it was all for the best that they took me prisoner," remarked Walter, "for now they will certainly be hunted down, and I hope your own account will be squared with the rest. I wonder what surname this Old Eli goes by, and who he is, any way."

"I suppose you hesitate to ask me, because you perceive that I have so many secrets. This old fellow's name is Eli Stark; and the man you call Number One is his son William. I had no idea they were highwaymen till I gathered it from your story, though I knew they were villains."

"He knows Mr. Mercer," mused Walter, "and I think he knows my father; but if he wished to tell me more, he would do so. It troubles him to be questioned, and I wouldn't have him moody again for the world!"

The dinner was not a very enjoyable one, for the hermit's thoughts had grown more troubled, so that even the delicious pickerel was but little tempting to

him, although Walter, it must be said, did it full justice.

His fitful companion grew less silent and more hopeful the next day; yet the boy could not help feeling the monotony of this kind of life, and as other days passed with no tidings from the outside world, he became depressed by the inactivity of his position and the suspense of deferred expectation.

To explore the cave would require sound limbs; and his sprain was not yet well, while Mr. Percy was far from being in a strong condition.

Had any accident happened to Ralph, so that he had never delivered the letter? Much as he had wished for time to navigate the underground lake, he now wished still more for the arrival of his father, in order that some plan might be arranged looking to the capture of the robbers. The sooner they were brought to justice, the better would be Mr. Mercer's chance of recovering some portion of his lost property.

It was just possible that Mr. Dayton might have been so put at ease by the intelligence of his son's safety, that he would think it unnecessary to come in quest of him, but this was far from probable. He would be anxious to solve all uncertainties immediately, and to place the boy beyond even the most remote chance of recapture.

As to Mr. Mercer, although Walter had never heard of his existence until within a few days, he now felt as if half acquainted with him. He recalled every look and tone of his young companion of the stage, and wondered if she had not since that memorable night felt a strong curiosity to learn his fate.

It was plain that the hermit knew something of the Mercer family—his manner had shown it—and Walter felt half angry with him for not going straight on and telling what that *something* was.

"If anything was troubling *my* mind," he said, "I would let it out to some friend, and then I should feel better. But I think Mr. Percy must always have been singular, even before he became a hermit."

It seemed as if Nature had made what provisions she well could for him. She had provided him with a house, and so made him her tenant. She brought fish and venison to his door, and loaded the mountain side with berries in their season.

But most remarkable of all was the *gas* supply of which he had spoken. Walter accompanied him to the spot where it was obtained, and found that the natural gas came from a small fissure in a rock. The hermit secured it by means of an ingenious contrivance of his own, and it was so pure as to be at once fit for use.

"I should think," said the boy, "that the spring close by the cave would be tainted with it."

"But you find that it is not so."

"I see—I know your spring water is just as good as can be."

It was an unique experience to see gas thus drawn from a rock, there in the lonely wild, and the very simplicity of the process made the thing all the more impressive.

CHAPTER XIV.

TWO MILES UNDERGROUND.

At length, Walter's troublesome ankle having become comparatively strong, he begged his companion to show him something of the mysteries of the great cave ; and taking a lantern with them, the two proceeded to explore that portion of it lying between its mouth and the lake.

The way was very difficult at first, from the inequalities of the floor ; and there was, besides, some

danger of getting lost, as there were vast chambers and long and ghostly alleys of which even Mr. Percy himself had discovered but little.

A million bright stalactites gleamed overhead and about the supporting walls, and seemed to assist the lanterns with the endless reflections they cast.

"If it is so wonderful here," said Walter, "what will it be when we launch out upon the lake? I am not a bit sorry now for my delay. If I had gone home at once I should have missed a great sight."

"Probably we see but a small portion of it," said Mr. Percy. "No one knows what may lie beyond the water, or how far some of the passages on each hand may reach."

"How near may we be to the lake now?" asked Walter at length.

"It must be close by," said the hermit, "but somehow I am not as strong as I supposed—perhaps the air affects me. I am afraid we will have to return without taking a trip in the canoe."

"O, sir, if you feel ill," said Walter, "let us go back at once. I can wait—I can come again some time."

"No," said Mr. Percy, "we will keep on now till we reach the water; I wish you to see it, and my canoe also. After this venture, you will know almost as much of the place as I do; but of course we shall not give up the idea of a more thorough exploration."

So they passed onward slowly and carefully, the lantern light making a broad path through the darkness.

At some points the roof was little higher than a a man's head; at others it was so lofty as to be completely lost in the gloom that hung above the lantern rays.

There was, withal, a gradual descent of the cave's floor, as this tunnel of Nature's own making went diving under the mountain.

Walter felt awe-struck under the dome of this vast cathedral, so immeasurably older than any of the works of man. He could not help feeling as if living beings must abide there, though, like the ghouls of the poet, they might be "neither man nor woman, neither brute nor human."

This feeling was intensified by the glow of those beautiful crystals, which from the moment of entrance had continued to amaze him. He knew that they had been formed there during the awful ages of silence which that wonderful place had known; and he seemed to have been suddenly transported to the antediluvian world.

At length the lanterns revealed the sparkle of water.

"This," said Mr. Percy, "is as far as I have ever been. All beyond is mystery. Here is a little sea, and we stand on its shore as the old Spaniards did on that of the Pacific—only that they had sunlight, while we have darkness."

The water, which had never known breeze or ripple, appeared inky black; yet this was only on account of its surroundings, for in broad light of day it would have lain clear as the purest fountain.

The birch canoe was found where the hermit had left it when he had come here all alone, with no hope of that human sympathy which now accompanied and cheered him.

The little craft was sixteen feet in length by two and a half in width, and was so light that its builder had found, as he remarked, very little difficulty in getting it there, so far as the weight was concerned.

He had supplied it with lamps for burning gas, of which a good supply was to be carried, though oil lanterns would be taken along besides. Pushed off into the water, it swam like a cork. Walter got into it.

"Where is the paddle?" he asked.

Mr. Percy looked blank.

"There!" he exclaimed, "I had entirely forgotten that I took the paddle with me as a staff, upon leaving the canoe here. I am sorry, for I meant that you should at least have the pleasure of giving the new vessel a trial, if only for a few yards from the shore."

"It is nothing," said Walter, "we can come again, and then perhaps you will feel better, too."

"Yes," said his companion, "we will come prepared for a voyage of discovery; still I wish you could have had the satisfaction of paddling about a little."

"We are now two miles from our starting point, you think?" said Walter.

"Yes; two miles under the green old earth."

Walter thought what a strange, solemn thing it was.

"The trees, the rocks and the mountains are all above us," he said, "just as the clouds are all below people who go up in balloons!"

"Yes," replied Mr. Percy, "and I don't know but there may be as much sublimity in great depths as in great heights."

"I can't help thinking of the lake of the Dismal Swamp," said Walter. "I guess the canoe the story tells of must have looked like this one.

'She's gone to the lake of the Dismal Swamp,
Where all night long by the firefly lamp
She paddles her white canoe.'

The ghost would have found better lamps in this cave—only it would have needed a lantern to bring them out."

"Yes, they shine by reflection, like the moon," remarked the hermit, "and they are almost as old, I suppose."

"I wonder if we shall find any fossil bones," said Walter.

"Not just now, probably, yet it is possible that the cave may contain something of the kind."

"No mammoth bones, I am sure," replied the young enthusiast, "for a mammoth could never have squeezed himself through the entrance."

"As likely mammoths' remains as others," said Mr. Percy. "It is impossible to know what changes nature may have wrought, or how many entrances the cavern may have had in the lapse of ages."

Walter sat in the canoe, while his companion held it by a small line, allowing it to swing off as far as possible.

Presently, while putting his hand down in the inky water, he felt it come in contact with some living object. He withdrew it very suddenly, with a thrill of surprise if not alarm.

"I touched some moving thing," he exclaimed—"something alive!"

The lantern light fell brightly upon the water, and the two explorers peered very carefully into the gloomy lake, but could detect nothing which had the appearance of life.

"You may have been deceived," said Mr. Percy.

"No," replied Walter; "when it touched my hand it darted off as if frightened."

Just then, fixing his eyes upon a particular spot, he gave a little start. "There it is!" he whispered, "that or some other. Perhaps I can catch it."

He put his hand down softly, made a quick grasp, and landed the creature in the canoe.

It was a fish, about eight inches long, scaleless and eyeless, and shaped much like a common perch.

"The Mammoth Cave of Kentucky is inhabited by eyeless fish," observed Mr. Percy, "but I know nothing as to their size and shape."

"Eels appear in wells, I have heard," said Walter, "and why not fish in caves?"

"True," said Mr. Percy, "and they come from *nowhere*. They simply *appear*—just because nature has got ready for them."

They now hauled the canoe upon the dry floor of the cavern, and fastened it with the line as a provision against any rise of the waters. Then turning, they retraced their steps towards the daylight.

Mr. Percy was considerably exhausted, and Walter feared that another long delay might take place before the exploration could be made. He felt, too, that he ought to make his way toward the nearest settlement without more loss of time; but a wilderness of forty miles in width stretched between himself and civilization, and in this, without a guide, he must almost certainly become lost. His hermit friend, before accompanying him, must recover some of his ordinary strength.

However, the case did not seem really urgent, and, besides, Ralph might at any time make his appearance with Mr. Dayton.

"I should not be afraid to attempt it," he said.

"But you shall not," replied the hermit. "I should never forgive myself should I let you go off alone."

"I have seen something of the mountains," continued Walter, "and I rather like wandering about among them."

"Yes, you have seen something of them, and you remember how easily you got lost the moment you escaped from the robbers."

"It was fortunate, though," said Walter. "I shall never regret that part of my experience."

And he felt that he had begun to entertain a real affection for the man with whom he was, and would be extremely sorry should he have to think of him as once more living all alone in his gloomy cell.

CHAPTER XV.

WALTER ON THE WATCH.

THE hermit at length felt himself in a condition to proceed with the underground enterprise.

Walter, who had in the meantime made another paddle, in order that each of them might be supplied with one, now interested himself in the subject of provisions.

He seemed half to hope that they would get lost and be gone long enough to require a large quantity.

"Certainly," said Mr. Percy, "we must carry something to eat, for we are going into an unexplored sea, and cannot tell what may befall us."

"We can take a good lot of bread," said Walter, "and carry along some dried venison besides. As to water, that is already there."

"Yes," said his companion, "the water is excellent, so we shall not suffer from thirst. I hope we shall not have occasion for a large quantity of provisions, but it is well to be on the safe side."

"After all," said Walter, in a deprecating tone, "we may find that the lake does not reach far, and is only a little pool; but I should not think there would be fish in it in that case."

"Possibly it may not be as large as we imagine," said the hermit, "but at all events we shall have the the satisfaction of seeing what lies beyond it."

"At the worst," remarked Walter, "if we were to get shipwrecked, we could eat fish."

"But I think you would find that kind of diet hardly to your taste after a time; besides, those fish may be poisonous; we cannot tell."

Walter enjoyed the little details of cavern house-

keeping, but he varied the indoor life with a good amount of outdoor exercise. Both the mountain above and the gorge below had their fascination for him, and sometimes he wandered to a considerable distance.

"Be careful that you do not get 'turned around,'" said Mr. Percy, "when you go out in the manner you do. There are all sorts of queer corners here, and you must remember that my door is not numbered."

"Oh, I never forget that," said Walter, "nor that the streets are not named, though some of them are more grand than the finest ones in San Francisco. What would they say there to a front a thousand feet high? Some of these rocks are higher than that, and yet nobody comes here to see them."

The expedition for the next day having been duly discussed, he went clambering over the giant cliffs, armed with the hermit's gun, and looking keenly about for the large game which was often met with about the mountain.

Catching sight of a grizzly bear, he cautiously followed the animal, his native courage mastering the sense of peril. Bruin, however, was traveling upon some business of his own, and went swinging his great paws along just fast enough to keep out of his pursuer's way.

At length, finding it useless to follow him further, the boy halted and sat down on a rock to rest.

Presently he was surprised at the sound of human voices at some distance, and parting the boughs of a cedar that grew beside the rock, he discovered two men, who had apparently come out from a line of timber, and were now approaching his position along a gulch which led past it.

He at first supposed them to be ordinary hunters, but as they came up, a close view of their faces

caused him to draw his breath quickly. It seemed to him that he had seen those faces before.

"Yes," he said, "I am sure of it. I marked every man of those eight that we saw crossing the stream, and these are two of them. They have been out hunting, I suppose, and perhaps hung their game on the trees to be brought home with horses."

"This hyar kind o' exercise sort o' gins me a appetite," said one of them. "I feel's if I could eat everything we've got in the den."

"Yes," said the other, "it kind o' sets a feller's stomick on aige, I reckon. I'm tired o' trampin' about afoot when there's no need on't. 'F't hadn't been for Number One we'd a brought the horses along."

"Bill Stark likes to hunt afoot," remarked the first speaker; "I don't. And he'll tramp round 'thout gettin' tired, longer'n any man I ever see."

"Well," said the other, "I want some supper, and Bill may come along when he gits ready."

As their voices died away, Walter rose to his feet.

"I'll follow them if it's a possible thing," he said. "Here's another link in the chain, and a long one, too! O, it will come, I know it will! It is lucky that I came out this afternoon."

Leaving his position on the rock, he followed in a course parallel to that of the robbers, although considerably higher, so that at every opening which they passed, he could see them plainly, meanwhile taking good care that they should not discover him.

For a number of miles the two men strode on, their route upon the whole being circuitous, and the region into which they plunged growing more wild. It was near sunset, and Walter felt that his good friend, the hermit, must soon become very anxious on his account; yet the opportunity before him seemed too important to be neglected.

The obstacles in his way increased as he proceeded, so that in order not to lose sight of the men for any considerable time, it was necessary to keep as near them as safety would permit ; and once or twice his eagerness became such that he escaped being seen by them only by the merest good luck.

But at length he found that they were missing, and so suddenly that he was puzzled to know what could have become of them.

"It is strange I should have lost them entirely," he said, "but it must be that they have gone on somehow, though I don't know in what direction. I hardly think their den can be just here."

He cautiously approached the spot where he had caught the last glimpse of them, and then placed himself in a position to look beyond it ; but they had vanished, and he saw that any further effort to trace them would be useless.

It required no small amount of courage to remain even for a short time upon such dangerous ground, but Walter depended much on his watchfulness, and still more on his ability to run in case of need. He felt that in a fair field there was not a robber of them all who could catch him.

"Their hiding place cannot be far off," he said, "but I want to know exactly where it is. I mean to conceal myself here and wait for Bill Stark. When he comes I will see which way he turns from this place. He must be along soon, for he's only hunting, and, of course, won't stay out a great while after dark."

He crept into a position overlooking the path which he believed the two robbers to have followed, and closing about him a growth of low bushes, waited impatiently for Number One.

The gathering dusk soon began to obscure the surrounding objects, and again he thought of Mr. Percy

and the anxiety he would naturally feel at such a prolonged absence. Once or twice he nearly resolved to abandon his watch and hasten to the cave without delay; but then Bill Stark would probably be along in a few minutes, and it would be safer to see him pass than to run the risk of meeting him.

The whippoorwills were calling out from the thickets; an opossum ran along on the rocks, and a raccoon came scratching down a neighboring tree, where it had probably been sleeping through the afternoon. Walter counted the minutes, for he was growing nervous and lonesome.

"The fellow may not pass this way, after all," he reflected, "and I will not wait much longer for him. I can keep a good lookout ahead on the way back, so that he will not be able to get a sight of me."

He was in an "enemy's country," and his feelings were not unlike those of a border scout when lying in wait by some village of hostile savages.

CHAPTER XVI.

A POINT GAINED AND A PATH LOST.

THE wawl of a mountain lion at no great distance did not tend to increase the young watcher's sense of security; and when a lamentable sort of mewing among the rocks told that the animal was getting still nearer to him, his uneasiness grew apace.

"Well, I'm in for it!" he thought, "but I'll fight only on the defensive. Robbers to right of me, and pumas to left of me, I'm as badly off as Tennyson's 'Six Hundred!'"

The feeling he experienced was far graver than his manner of expressing it. The puma might be inconsiderate enough not to appreciate the delicacy of his situation, and should necessity compel him to fire, the whole gang of villains might come rushing out

WALTER SUDDENLY SURPRISED BY THE ENEMY. See page 66.

of their den to see what was taking place in their neighborhood.

As Walter was revolving such a contingency, he was startled by the report of a gun, so near that it seemed almost deafening. The mountain lion gave a loud cry, but another shot quickly fired reduced it to silence. It had sprung into view with its last struggle, so that he could see it lying upon the ground, while the man who had fired approached and examined it.

"Bill Stark!" thought Walter. "Now I wonder if the rest of them will swarm out to see what he has fired at."

But they did not "swarm." Nobody came, and after a brief examination of the animal, the robber strode on. As he passed behind a thicket, the ambushed watcher arose and followed him as silently as possible.

Soon he was again in sight, but it was a very difficult matter to watch him, and at the same time avoid detection, as his eyes were doing full duty. At some points he would come out into such plain view that his pursuer would be obliged to hide himself very quickly, and next there would be need of hastening the chase to avoid losing the direction altogether.

Once he paused and listened, in the meantime looking all about him, but Walter was so close in the shadow of a thicket, that he could not be seen. He had trodden upon a dry stick, and it was the snapping of this which Number One had heard. A greater caution seemed necessary, and our young friend now followed more by sound than by sight, getting only brief glimpses of the robber.

The retreating figure at length passed behind the point of a sharp rock, and when Walter reached the spot, he could neither see or hear anything which would give a clew to the direction taken.

The surroundings were of the most bewildering character—a strange mingling of thickets and crags. There were natural openings which looked as if nothing but a panther or grizzly bear had ever traversed them. There were rocks which seemed ready to fall from their places ; and dead trees with their roots in the air and their tops downward.

Where Bill Stark had gone was a mystery. He had disappeared precisely as the others had done, but into what part of the labyrinth—whether upon the right hand or the left—was a problem beyond solution.

Walter moved very cautiously, well knowing that the den of the robbers must be somewhere close at hand. But he had hardly time to take in all the wilderness of the scene, when he perceived at a little distance a sudden red glow, as if a lantern had just been lighted. It moved away, disappearing as if carried directly into the mountain, leaving for a moment a faint gleam behind that quickly vanished.

Going softly to the spot, he found himself shut in by earth and rocks above and on both sides. He ventured a little farther, and was in utter darkness. But through this, at what seemed a long distance, he again caught the gleam of the lantern. To follow it was, of course, out of the question, and he had only to stand watching the telltale glow till it was lost in some dark recess of what he now perceived must be a cave of great extent.

"This, then, is the robbers' principal den," he said, as he noiselessly retreated. "I have run a prodigious risk, but I'm glad I came. It seems as if I had got close to Mr. Mercer's gold. How little I thought of following it up in this way when Maud was telling about it in the stage coach! I wonder what she would say if she knew where I am at this moment?"

As he emerged into the open air, it was like com-

ing out of a dark cellar ; and if he had not before been completely "turned around" as to the points of the compass, he certainly was so now. North, south, east, and west were all alike to him, while his situation was rendered all the more nerve-trying from the apprehension every moment experienced that the next step might bring him in contact with one or more of the robbers.

The thought of the uneasiness which Mr. Percy must feel on his account troubled him more than anything else. He knew that the hermit would not be able to rest quietly in his cave, but would be out in quest of him, spending perhaps the entire night in a vain search, and the idea of this brought a sense of self-condemnation.

Twice he came upon the spot where Number One had killed the mountain lion, and seeing that he must have been moving in a circle, he struck out with a grim determination to keep a straight course. And he remembered also having somewhere read that a person who is lost always turns to the *left*—never to the right.

"Well," he mused, "I'll watch my left foot and make sure that it takes just as long steps as the other. I'll remember, as a sailor would say, that there is a strong current setting to the left, and so guard against it."

This time he avoided the dead puma, yet was a little disturbed by the thought that perhaps the *right* leg might not now be holding its own, since the left had become aroused to a full sense of its duty. The stars were obscured by a haze, so that they afforded no guide, while thickets, rocks, and gulches were everywhere.

Walter continued walking for a considerable time, till convinced that although he might have been able to keep a straight course, it was not the right one.

He therefore swerved from it at a venture, but found himself only the more bewildered.

"There is one other thing I can do," he said; "I can fire the gun, and if Mr. Percy should be within hearing he may answer by firing his rifle. I do hate to think that he is looking all about for me, tired and troubled. But then luckily he has his other gun, so that he would be able to keep off a grizzly or a puma out here in the dark."

He mounted a rock and fired twice, listening each time for an answer; but all remained silent. Gazing about at the horizon, he at length determined upon what seemed to him as being more probably than any other the proper course, and getting down from the rock, he pursued his way as fast as the darkness would permit. But doubt grew stronger and stronger as he advanced, and after a mile or two he once more came to a halt, discharging both barrels of his gun as before, and again waiting in vain for a reply.

To wander longer in this state of uncertainty would be folly, as he might with every step be getting farther from the right path to the cave.

"I'll remain here till morning," he said to himself, "and then I may be able to see how far I have gone out of the way and where I am." Yet he did not feel quite sure that even daylight would resolve all doubt.

To a spirit that is naturally adventurous there is a charm in difficult situations, and had it not been for the thought of Mr. Percy, our young friend would hardly have regretted the mishap which had thus left him to pass a night in the solitary wilderness.

He had in his pocket a few cases of matches, placed there at the time of exploring the hermit's cave, and now gathering a quantity of dry grass and piling brushwood upon it, he set the heap on fire. Next he collected a number of dead limbs from fallen trees and added them to the rest.

The blaze had a cheerful look as it rolled up against the side of a large rock, and Walter, feeling that he had nothing more to do for the present, threw himself down beneath a tree and watched the brands as they crackled and fell slowly away one after another. He thought of Ralph and the night encampments which the hermit had described him as making among the mountains, and almost wished that he himself were obliged to find his home in such rugged places with no company but his rifle.

For the greater part of the night the activity of his thoughts prevented sleep, and two or three times he arose and recruited the fire, feeling a real enjoyment in doing so from the mere novelty of the thing. It had always been a saying of Mrs. Dayton that her boy was at home anywhere, and could she have seen him in his present situation, she would have been doubly impressed with the fact. He gathered up the fuel with a real enjoyment, and lay down to see it burn with all the satisfaction of a Robin Hood.

At length he fell into a brief nap of perhaps an hour, and when he awoke the sky was reddened with the streaks of daybreak.

CHAPTER XVII.

COMPANY AT BREAKFAST.

As the light broadened, the scene around took on a wonderful ruggedness and grandeur, but to this Walter had become accustomed. It was now his chief anxiety to find whether anything within the scope of his vision would assist him in deciding upon the point toward which he ought to direct his course.

East he could now distinguish from west, and as a consequence, north from south. But was he in a much better condition on this account, since it was impossible to say from what direction he had reached

his present standpoint? Where was the robbers' cave—to his right or to his left? behind him or before him as he stood? Of this he knew no more than he had at midnight. All things still had that appearance to him which they always have to a person who is lost.

"Well," he thought, "I am no 'babe in the woods'; I have got out of worse difficulties than this within the last fortnight, and I'll just take it coolly. The more a fellow frets when he's in trouble, the worse it is for him."

Feeling quite hungry, as he had eaten nothing since the previous noon, he resolved to shoot a rabbit and broil it upon a stick for his breakfast. Then he would feel refreshed and be able to take a fair start in one direction or another.

As rabbits were numerous among the rocks, he had no difficulty in securing one. Then dressing it and rekindling his fire, he broiled it in the Indian fashion over the glowing coals. He took all possible care not to burn it, as the savages often do, but to cook it evenly outside and in. When it was done, he laid it to cool on a broad strip of bark, and it certainly had a very tempting odor.

Walter felt that the want of salt might prove a serious drawback, but he hoped that a good appetite would go far to supply its place. So, making a table of a small elevation at the foot of the tree where he had slept, and using the piece of bark for a plate, he prepared to take his meal. And here let me say in parenthesis, that such a meal, so rude, so simple, taken in the wild wood, has a relish which all the conveniences and fine arts of cookery fail to give in a *house.*

He had just opened his jack-knife, preparatory to cutting off one of the fore quarters, when a step close behind the tree by which he sat caused him to look

up in alarm. His heart leaped to his throat as he saw within ten feet of him the figure of a man with a gun.

"One of the robbers," was his first thought, but almost instantly he saw his mistake.

"Ralph! Ralph!" he cried, forgetting that the shape before him was as deaf as the mountain itself, "where have you come from? How glad I am to see you!"

It seemed as if the sight of a human being gave him for the first time a realizing sense of his loneliness. Ralph watched the motion of his lips and smiled, as if the thought of an outburst of words addressed to a mere post amused him. Then he made signs, first of explanation, and next of inquiry. They were given more deliberately than usual, so that Walter interpreted most of them with but little difficulty.

He gathered that Ralph was on his way to the hermit; that he had slept in the woods that night; and that he had in some way lost his matches, so that he could not make a fire that morning.

"Glad of it," thought Walter; "he has not had a good warm breakfast, only some bits of dry bread, I suppose, and this rabbit will go to the right place."

He signified these thoughts to Ralph as well as he was able, and found that a bit of rabbit would be very acceptable. The mute guest must have seen with what hearty good will the invitation to breakfast was extended, for to the young host the occasion was a complete delight, to say nothing of his relief at so unexpected an escape from a longer wandering.

Ralph had plenty of salt, so that the rabbit would not lack seasoning, after all, and he produced also a few small crackers which made an excellent complement.

Their pantomimic discourse had to be, in some

measure, suspended during the meal, as one can hardly converse with facility in the sign language, and eat rabbit at the same time. More than once Walter caught himself addressing his companion in words, and then Ralph would laugh at the earnest manner, though he had to guess at the rest. He saw perhaps how difficult it was for his companion to gesticulate without speaking at the same time.

The very enjoyable repast being over, each tried to inform the other in the way of particulars as to what had taken place since their previous meeting, but the endeavor was not very successful on either side. For though Ralph was skilled in his own sign language, he found it as difficult to understand Walter as did Walter to understand him. Our young lad could arrive at generalities, but was perplexed by details.

By holding up both hands, with the fingers and thumbs spread, Ralph told him that it was ten miles to the hermit's cave, though it seemed incredible that he could have wandered so far. He reflected, however, that, as he had at first followed the robbers for at least half that distance, and had taken a wrong course afterwards, it was not strange that he should find himself where he was. His sole anxiety was now for the hermit, who might be miles from his home, engaged in a vain and weary search.

Refreshed by their early breakfast, the two companions set out for the cave, stopping once by the way to drink at a clear spring with which Ralph was familiar, and where they saw the broad footprints of a grizzly bear, looking as if just imprinted in the stony soil.

As they traveled on, Walter's tongue would sometimes forget, in spite of him, that its office was now delegated to the hands; and, in fact, he found it quite as difficult to converse by signs while walking as it had been while eating.

From every favorable position, they scanned the surrounding region, hoping to see Mr. Percy if he were really out and thus save him from further trouble. At length Ralph, coming to a full stop, like an Irish setter, pointed towards a cliff at some distance aside from their course. Walter looked and saw a human figure just coming up from the other side of the rock.

"Hello!" shouted the boy with a voice that could have been heard a mile off, at the same time waving his arm.

"Hello!" returned the figure with an answering wave.

"Oh, Ralph!" cried Walter, "isn't this a streak of good luck? How near we were to leaving him behind!" And then bethinking himself, he would have translated the words into pantomime, but just then couldn't think of the motions.

Mr. Percy clambered down from his position, and they hastened to meet him. He was deeply thankful to find Walter safe.

"I have not closed my eyes," he said, "since you have been gone. Last night I was out on the mountain, lighting fires, and at times firing my rifle. Finally I went home, hoping you might have returned in my absence, and this morning I started again. I climbed that rock for a better observation, and it appears that you had just got into a position to see me and be seen by me as I reached the top."

Walter expressed a sincere concern for the trouble he had so unintentionally given, and beginning with the start, related his adventures in full.

"I thought of you all the while," he said, "and when it began to look as if I would have to spend the night in the open air I felt ready to fly. It plagued me to think you would be alarmed and go looking

for me. But I hadn't the least idea where I was, and so had to make the best of it."

"Well, I thank Heaven that nothing worse has come of it," said the hermit. "You ran too great a risk. It was a rash thing for you to lie in wait for the robbers in such a place, and still more rash to follow one of them into the den as you did. But I am glad to hear of the discovery you have made; it will save time and trouble. This gang must be rooted out at once, and what you have just learned will prove a great help."

Mr. Percy had no difficulty in arriving at all that Ralph had to tell. They conversed together with hands and arms flying like shutters, while Walter eagerly awaited the translation of the dialogue.

Mr. Dayton, Ralph signified, was absent from the country, having unexpectedly been called upon business down to the coast of old California. He knew nothing of his son's capture, but he had expected to be gone only two or three weeks, and would therefore soon be at home.

Walter's mother had received the letter of the robbers and had got his own immediately afterwards. She had come at once from San Francisco and sought out Ralph, who assured her that he would bring the boy back with him, but he had been obliged to spend some time in nursing a sick relative, and this was what had delayed his return.

He had also discovered the Mercers, finding them very poor. Mr. Mercer had been prostrated by his loss and was still in a very depressed condition. His wife was suffering from illness, but Maud, the daughter, was the good angel of both.

"She *must* be, I know," said Walter, impulsively, "she couldn't help being so!"

"To think that all this unhappiness should have been brought about by those villains!" murmured

Mr. Percy, while Walter's dark eyes glowed as he thought of the "good angel" and the possibility of serving her.

The three now proceeded towards the cave, and on reaching it, they were glad to throw themselves upon the comfortable bearskins for rest.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE.

"I THINK it would be my best course," said Walter, "to go back with Ralph to-morrow, tell my story, and see what can be done about the robbers."

"Yes," replied the hermit, "you will be able to give information of great value. The officers of the law will undoubtedly move in the matter as soon as they can learn anything definite as to the whereabouts of the gang."

"I believe I could go straight to the place in the daytime, even though I did get lost last night," rejoined the young adventurer.

"I do not doubt it," said Mr. Percy, "you could take your departure from the spot where you first saw the two men, and you would not be likely to get far out of the way."

"But, after all," said Walter, "the mouth of their den is more difficult to find than one would imagine. I almost wonder how they can get back there themselves in the dark, when they have been out on a foray."

"It is a wild and strange state of things," remarked the hermit, "and these are desperate men. The deeds of the old English highwaymen were on a very small scale as compared with theirs."

"I suppose so ; though I have never read much of the old highwaymen. My mother would never have allowed such books in the house."

"And she is wise. A thief is no less a thief because he rides a horse; and Tom King and Dick Turpin were no better than other thieves."

"In what way will a band of men manage so as to capture the robbers?" asked Walter. "It looks very difficult."

"Yes, it will be difficult; but the management must depend wholly on the circumstances that may present themselves. It will probably be done mostly by stratagem. A direct attack would be like the storming of a fort, and would no doubt cost a number of lives. The villains would fight desperately if driven to bay, and their knowledge of the region would give them a great advantage. I hope they will be secured without bloodshed on *either side.*"

"So do I," replied Walter, "though I don't believe I would wear crape for old Eli Stark, if he should happen to get killed. The miserable old villain! I can't help thinking of him as he appeared that day in the stage."

"But he is the very man who, above all others, must *not* be killed! We are all selfish, Walter, and the life of this old criminal is very dear to me."

The remark seemed strange, yet Walter was scarcely surprised by it after all that had passed.

"Now," continued Mr. Percy, "we cannot know how many hiding places they may have, but it seems probable that the den you have just discovered may be the principal one. That where you were imprisoned you would not be able to find again unless by accident. They must have some place where they keep their horses. These are probably picketed a part of the time in some opening where there is grass, but they must be sheltered at night to be kept from the wolves. There are places enough within the circuit of a few miles where a dozen or twenty horses could be hidden almost as securely as if they

were in the moon, and yet have plenty of rich grass."

"Of course," said Walter, "I could not go straight to the place where they carried me that first night, but I am sure from what they said to each other that their treasure is not there. I wish they were not so scattered. It seems to me, though, that if I were to look for my old prison I could find it at last. It is away up among some rocks, and they had a good deal of difficulty in getting me there blindfolded. But I wasn't blindfolded when I came skipping out of it. I remember how it looks, only I don't know where it is."

"As to that," replied Mr. Percy, "I can make a tolerably good guess from your description and from thinking what course you must have taken after getting out. I know something of the mountains, and while you are gone I shall not be idle."

"How glad I am that they took me prisoner!" said Walter.

"They made a great mistake when they did so, I do think," replied his good hermit friend.

"I told them what to expect."

"Yes, I don't doubt you did! I can see that in you."

"And you think my affair has done some good?"

"Good! it has done everything. Nobody knew anything about them before. You may some time know what you accomplished by that leap from the rock."

"It brought me *here*, that is true; and I am glad it happened, if only for that."

Never had Walter spoken with more sincere feeling. There was a magnetism about that long-haired man which strongly attracted him.

"You thought me a robber when you first saw me," said Mr. Percy, "and no wonder!"

"Yes, and I was wondering how I might escape from you."

"I think you were sent, Walter," said the hermit; "at all events we shall know some time whether you were or not."

That evening Ralph was as communicative as it is possible for a dumb man to be, and his hermit host seemed to read his gestures as if they were written sentences.

Sometimes he told of his encounters with bears and pumas. Think of a man fighting with a roaring bear, when in his own brain there is utter silence!

Mr. Percy would occasionally explain to Walter:

"You see he is showing us a place on his head where the skull seems to have been fractured. A grizzly did that—he has shown it to me before."

Walter laid his finger in the broken place and wondered how a man could have lived after such a wound.

"Now he is rolling up his sleeve to show how his arm once fared from a mountain lion."

All this was of some interest, but Walter and the hermit were both thinking more of other matters.

"I am glad he went to Mr. Mercer's," said our young lad, "that is the best of all."

"Yes," said Mr. Percy, "I am glad of it, too. I am sorry to learn that the poor man is so cast down. It is the thought of his wife and daughter that troubles him. He pointed at them, Ralph tells me, and signified that if he had but a twentieth part of the property he had lost it would make him happy once more."

"I hope he will get back more of it than that," said Walter. "I'm in a great hurry to let him know there is some hope."

"You and Ralph will go there," replied the hermit, "but of course you cannot give much assurance as

yet. Not a dollar of the treasure may ever be recovered, even should all the robbers be captured."

"Oh, I know that," answered Walter, "and shall take care not to say too much. It almost stops my breath to think of finding it!"

He was in high spirits at the thought of meeting that pretty traveling companion with whom he had never yet exchanged a single word, but who, as he felt, would be so glad to talk with him of the events of that memorable ride.

Thus with alacrity he prepared for the morrow's journey.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE JOURNEY WITH RALPH.

It had been settled that Walter should take Mr. Percy's gun, for the hermit would hear nothing of his going upon a mountain tramp of forty miles unarmed.

"You may need it, my good boy," he said, "before you shall have made a quarter of the distance. And now I charge you not to take any unnecessary risks. If you meet a bear, and he will let *you* alone, let *him* alone, by all means! I know how your parents would feel, and, for the present, let me stand in the place of both of them."

"I thank you, Mr. Percy," said the boy, deeply moved by the good man's solicitude, "and I shall remember your advice. I hope my father and mother will some day have a chance to thank you, too, for your kindness to me. I shall return to you as soon as possible after setting things in motion. I feel just as if we were to have old Eli before a court of justice and get back all Mr. Mercer's gold!"

His hopes were as strong and rugged as his surroundings; and indeed it does seem as if a person in

a mountainous region must be inspired with more vigorous thoughts than one upon a plain. There is a lifting of the spirit, as if nature would permit no despondency.

"What a shame that I should be obliged to take your gun," he said, "while I have a three hundred dollar rifle somewhere here among the mountains!"

"Perhaps it will come to light some day," said Mr. Percy.

"Oh, I am determined that it shall!" said Walter, "though that is a very small matter. I am going to have my gun back one of these days, you may be sure."

So they started out—Walter and his mute companion—Mr. Percy waving them a hopeful farewell from a point of the mountain rock, as they plunged into the wilderness.

"What a good man he is," thought Walter, "and how much he cares for me! Just for his sake, if for no other reason, I will try to take care of myself."

The only disagreeable feature of the journey, he believed, would lie in the lack of sociability; for, though it may not necessarily be a hardship to travel alone, it certainly is so to walk mile after mile beside one to whom we cannot speak. He soon found, however, that Ralph possessed the art of beguiling the way by such powers of observation as he would probably never have possessed but for his great infirmity.

Instead of going on as Walter had imagined he might do, with all the stolid indifference of a dumb animal, he was constantly trying to interest his companion in the details of woodcraft or in the peculiar scenes by the way. He pointed out to his young friend that the north side of the rocks and trees was not like the south side. He gave him to understand that what is called a "trail" is often faint as the faintest shadow; and that, though revealed instan-

taneously by a sweeping glance, it will sometimes vanish if regarded very steadily. This he illustrated by the almost imperceptible trace of a fleeing deer. The path it left appeared little more than imaginary, yet it was there nevertheless, and a trained eye could detect it for just a moment at a time.

Nothing escaped his observation. Once he picked up an arrow head, and showed how it had been fitted to the shaft; at another spot he paused by a great tree that had long creases in the bark, and gave his companion to understand that the marks had been made by wild animals when sharpening their claws there.

The unmeasured miles, however, seemed very long; and Walter was glad when they camped in the woods for the night, though Ralph did not seem in the least fatigued.

Next morning the tramp was resumed; and in the afternoon they came to a log house which seemed to be completely in the wilderness. As they were in need of water, Ralph signified that they would stop there, though he gave Walter to understand by an expressive pantomime that the inmates were surly and that he did not like them.

The door was open, but no one came at their knock. After repeating it and waiting some time in vain, they ventured to step within, to the water pail which stood close at hand. Walter cast a hasty glance around the rude apartment, taking in its belongings in a hurried manner, and mentally noting the objects he saw.

It was better furnished than he had expected to find it; but what particularly struck his attention was a Winchester rifle of such costly finish as would have made it an object of note almost anywhere. What was strangest, however, was that the weapon had an extremely familiar look, insomuch that he felt

a growing surprise as his eyes continued to rest upon it.

Considering himself an intruder, and feeling almost a sense of guilt from having entered uninvited, he hesitated to make any examination of the piece.

"I am foolish," he said to himself, "there are thousands of well-finished rifles that look just alike, and it is absurd to think that this can be mine. How could my rifle have got here?"

Still it did look so like it! There is a something about articles that we have handled as our own, which reveals their identity—a spirit, so to speak. Other implements may exactly resemble them in all their material make up, but our intuition tells us that they are not the same. We cannot tell wherein the difference lies, but simply feel that it exists.

"I could decide the case in an instant, if the gun were in my hands," thought Walter. "There is a small private mark on the guard of mine that no other rifle in the world can have. But I do hate to meddle with the man's gun in his own house, when I'm already an intruder. And the thought is such nonsense too! I will, though!" he added, "it will take but a moment."

He was about to lay his hand on the rifle, when a footstep at the door caused him to pause as if detected in an act of too great freedom in a stranger's house; and a tall, masculine woman entered, frowning ominously.

"Look a-yere," she said, "I don't 'low no travelers to make a tavern o' my house. What yer doin' yere, any way?"

Walter explained that they had called for a drink of water, and apologized for having entered uninvited. The woman, however, refused to be mollified by any explanation, and peremptorily ordered them to quit the premises, which they were very willing to do.

As they passed on, he could not help thinking about the gun. How unusual it must be, he reflected, to find a rifle of such exquisite finish among people living away off in the woods.

"I do believe it is mine, after all!" he said, "for it looked exactly like it in every particular. If the woman had not entered just as she did, I should have been able to decide for certain."

Ralph's motions indicated that he had once seen a man and a lad there, who seemed to be hunters, and that they could not and would not understand his signs.

Walter tried to tell him of the gun and his suspicions, and he found that Ralph, too, had noticed the weapon. His fingers flew quick to describe it, but he was evidently incredulous as to its identity with his young friend's rifle which he had never seen. Still our lad thought much of the matter, and wondered if this were another footmark, as it were, in the robbers' trail.

They soon proceeded rapidly towards a settlement some miles distant, and reached it without further adventure, tired enough to be glad of a good night's rest, and with appetites that would have done credit to a couple of miners.

CHAPTER XX.

WITH MAUD MERCER.

The incident of the gun continued to perplex Walter's thoughts. True, it might not, after all, be his gun, but he could not help feeling that it was. Yet the stronger his suspicions, the more important it seemed that they should not be openly breathed for the present.

As to his own escape from the robbers, that, for obvious reasons, had been kept as secret as possible. If

they were to take alarm from the idea that any clew to their whereabouts had been obtained, the difficulty of apprehending them would of course, be greatly increased. Ralph would accompany him to Mr. Mercer's house, after which an interview would be had with the deputy sheriff, and the plan of future operations arranged to be carried out as secretly as possible.

It was a walk of several miles to the rude log cabin of the Mercers, the best house which the family could now afford, and Walter felt a queer little flutter at the heart as he neared it. So here was the home of that pretty fellow passenger of his, who perhaps might never have given him a thought since then, but for the strange misfortune that had befallen him. He remembered the color of her eyes and the perfect outline of her fair face.

His heart beat fast as he knocked at the door, and still faster as a light step was heard approaching in answer to the rap. The latch was lifted by a young girl neatly but plainly dressed, who with a half courtesy glanced first at Walter, then at Ralph, and then at Walter again. For an instant her face grew pale, then quickly lighted up, as if the young blood had in it the flush of a thousand roses. It was a face perfectly beautiful, where all the changes of feeling were revealed upon the moment.

"I—I—" stammered Walter, "do you—"

"Oh! I know—I know—the stage coach—it is you indeed! You are the boy who was with me! It is so surprising! Come in, please." And then she made a gesture of welcome to Ralph, who accompanied his companion into the house.

The reception which our young friend met with from Mr. Mercer and his wife was full of feeling. They asked a thousand questions and listened with breathless interest to Walter's modest account of all

the strange adventures that had happened to him since his captivity.

"Oh, how many times Maud has related the events of that stage ride!" said Mrs. Mercer, "and how much she has talked of the scene when you were made prisoner! She feared you would never escape, and your fate troubled her greatly, until this deaf and dumb man, whom we had never seen before, told us of your safety."

"You were brave enough to take her part," said Mr. Mercer, "when one of the robbers became uncivil to her, and for that we all thank you more than we can express."

Maud's bright face flushed deeply, and tears of true feeling rose to her eyes, as her father said this.

"I thought," she remarked, "when that old man was trying to persuade the robbers not to take you away, that he was a true friend to you; and you can't think how it surprised me when the deaf man told us that this excellent old gentleman belonged to the gang! After the stage was allowed to go on, he talked to the passengers as if he were one of the most feeling men in the world, and said that such shameful outrages ought to be put a stop to at once. He blamed the authorities for not being more active, and said he meant to see if something could not be done in this particular case."

"Yes," said her mother, "Maud was full of praises of that kind old gentleman, so that I really desired to see him! She believed, too, that he must be a man of some influence, and hoped that he would stir the matter to the bottom!"

"My hopes," remarked Mr. Mercer, "of recovering even a small portion of my property are very slight. Before I learned of your adventure, I had no hope whatever. Our good friend here, who took the pains to seek me out, made known to me what you had dis-

covered so far as you had then gone; but I think your discovery of the second cave still more important, as that probably is the principal den. I now think that there would be a chance of reclaiming some of the spoils should a descent be made upon the gang in a proper manner."

"I think so, too," said Walter, "but then, of course, there are a great many chances of missing it. If they should get the least wind of what is intended, or of what we know about them, it would be all up with us."

"The only hope I have," replied Mr. Mercer, "rests upon the probability that they would not have attempted to convey so large an amount of gold out of the mountains as yet, but would be more likely to hide it where they hide themselves."

"Oh, how dangerous it will be," said Maud, "to look for them in their hiding place! It would be better to remain poor than to run such a dreadful risk!"

"I do not think so," replied her father. "If by risking my life I could stand a good chance of recovering what I have lost, I would gladly do so. But I hope the capture of the gang may be effected without any great danger. They must, if possible, be taken wholly by surprise."

"Still I cannot help shuddering to think of it," said Maud. "Oh! do take good care of yourselves, if it must be done—it all appears so dreadful!" And the mother joined with her daughter in the entreaty that nothing rash should be attempted.

"Your hermit friend," said Mr. Mercer, "must be a remarkable character from what you tell me of him. It is very singular that such a man should have chosen the life he is leading."

"Yes, sir, it seems strange; but I think he has been terribly wronged in some way, and I believe the

old robber we have been talking about had something to do with it."

"I cannot imagine," observed Mr. Mercer "where he can have met with me. Percy—Mr. Percy—I have no recollection of ever having been acquainted with any one of that name."

"I am not quite sure that it is his real name after all—he said I might *call* him so," replied Walter.

"And he seems to feel a personal interest in me, you think?"

"Yes, sir; he spoke as if that were the case."

"And you believe that he, too, has suffered from that old man of the stage coach?"

"I feel sure of it," said Walter, "from a few expressions that he dropped; but he told me that I must ask him no questions. I think he has some hope that if the robbers should be brought to justice, something might turn up in his favor, and that he wishes to remain unknown unless it should be so."

"I wonder," remarked Mr. Mercer, "that anything a gang of robbers could do should cause an honest man to hide himself in the wilderness. It seems hard to understand how he could have become a hermit from such a circumstance."

"But he had no idea," explained Walter, "that these men were robbers till my affair happened. I think he has known them, or one of them, at least, somewhere else."

"Well," replied Mr. Mercer, "his case is a puzzle to me. He must be very odd at the best. There is something romantic in the idea of an educated man living in a cave in the manner he does, but it is a sad, dreamy kind of romance."

"You can't think how strange it seems to me to be in a house!" Walter observed, looking about him. "I feel all the time as if there were something missing. It appears odd not to see the rock walls shut-

ting me in, and to look out of windows and doors."

Mrs. Mercer was quite feeble, so that Maud was the active spirit of the household. She prepared tea; and in watching her as she flew lightly about at her task, Walter felt that she looked even prettier than when in the stage coach. As he saw her neat and delicate table arrangement, he thought with a kind of disgust of his morning meal in the forest, when he had cooked a poor little rabbit on a stick! Then, too, he thought of his culinary achievements in the cave, and how awkward they would have appeared to her could she have witnessed them!

She laughed merrily as he described some of his housekeeping, perhaps thinking that it was all which could have been expected from a boy, though she did not say so. When the little family was seated at the table, she poured the tea and helped Walter to the plain but excellently prepared dishes.

How happy he felt! What was all the rude hospitality of caves and woods, where there was no pretty Maud Mercer to spread the cloth or pour out the tea?

CHAPTER XXI.

A ROUGH VISITOR.

Mr. Mercer did not expect to remain permanently where he now was, but had accepted this home for the time being until he should be able to look about him for some business which should offer a comfortable support. Since his health had improved, he had met with a promise of employment which would shortly be open to him, and though it was little better than drudgery, he felt glad to accept it. Maud, however, would still be denied the school advantages she had once enjoyed, as her mother's feebleness, and

the smallness of her father's means, would be insurmountable obstacles in the way of her leaving home.

"It troubles me beyond measure," said Mr. Mercer, while she was out of the room for a moment—"she was so happy, and was progressing so fast with her studies. She tries to go on with them at home, but it is not like being at school. I am in hopes that things will grow somewhat better with us by and by, but my plans of every kind have been crushed by this misfortune, and I can see very little encouragement."

"I am sure that Maud feels the blow very keenly," said her mother, "but she tries very hard to conceal her disappointment. Her concern is for her father and me; she knows that we are troubled more on her account than our own, and she wishes us to feel that the change in her condition is nothing which can make her unhappy."

"Yes," said Mr. Mercer, "she has shed many tears for us, but not one, I think, for herself. While she is left to us we are certainly not desolate; and I do wish that I could have a more realizing sense of this. But, Walter, when all that a man has gathered in a lifetime is swept away at a single stroke, and especially as mine has gone, it is something terrible to bear!"

"I should think so," said Walter; "I should think it must be dreadful. How I wish it could be recovered! and I believe it will be!"

"You are more sanguine than I am," was the reply, "but your story gives me a gleam of hope, and I am determined to leave nothing undone in that direction. The sheriff, you are sure, will be here to-morrow?"

"Yes, sir; Ralph is well acquainted with him, and will bring him here to talk with you."

It was evident that Mr. Mercer was beginning to feel encouraged, and as to Walter, his confidence in the success of the undertaking was now greater than ever. His sympathies had much to do with his hopes, and so it seemed to him that justice must triumph.

In the glow of sunset he accompanied Maud about the romantic rocks near her home, and they forgot all else in conversing of that vividly-remembered ride in the stage coach and the events that had succeeded it.

"How dreadfully frightened I was!" she said; "I cannot tell how I got out of the stage. When you spoke to the man that was so insolent to me, I trembled all over, for I did not know what horrid thing they might do to you. And since then you have lived in a cave! I would like to know how a cave looks, for I never saw one."

"Oh, I wish you could see that one," replied Walter; "it is grand—all studded with shining crystals like stars! And away in, two miles from its mouth, there is a lake that reaches no one knows how far. Mr. Percy and I intend to explore it soon in a little canoe that he has made."

"That will be nice! but isn't there danger of getting lost? I should be afraid to go so far underground, and on a lake, too. It must be dark, I should think."

"Yes, it is dark, but we shall carry four lanterns in the canoe, and the danger of getting lost will not be much."

"I should get lost the first thing, I am sure!"

"Why, Miss Mercer! you wouldn't if you were a boy."

"I know boys can do almost anything, *Mr. Dayton!*"

"Oh, please don't, now!" laughed Walter, nobody ever 'Mistered' me before!"

"But you called me 'Miss Mercer!'"

"Well, then, say 'Walter,' and I will say 'Maud.' I didn't know that you—that you thought as I do about such things."

"Do you really think the robbers have not made away with my father's gold, and there is a good prospect of getting it back?"

"I certainly do—but then I——" He thought of Mr. Percy's caution. "Of course, we may be disappointed—it all depends so on circumstances."

"Oh, I do hope some of it may be recovered, my father has been so dreadfully cast down. He was so lively and full of his pleasantest sayings once, and now he suffers so much!"

"He thinks it will be hard for you."

"Yes; but if he and mother could be happy, I would not mind myself."

"I know. I should feel as you do. But then—Oh, it is too bad!"

"Of course, it is a great disappointment to me. This is a rude place where we live now, and the people are not like those I used to see."

"Perhaps they may be kind-hearted, though. I thought at first that the hermit was one of the robbers."

"Yes; but *he* is a gentleman, you say. You would know after a few words what he is. I am glad to have some of the rough people call here, because I know that they are well-meaning, but there are others that I wish would keep away. There is one, a young man that comes around on horseback—and—and——"

"A young man!"

"Yes; I never saw him till a short time ago. One day when I was out, I heard the report of a rifle close to me, and a moment after a wounded deer came crashing through a thicket right up to the place

where I stood. I screamed when I saw it coming, but it fell dead a few yards from me. Then a young man with a gun came dashing after it, and when he saw me he apologized in his rough way for having 'skeered me most to death,' as he said. I turned to go home, but he kept close to my side and went to the house with me. I wouldn't have minded his roughness, but he was bold and impertinent, and kept praising my looks ; and since then he has come around very often. He won't believe that we don't want his company."

"Is he good-looking?" asked Walter, with a touch of anxiety.

"*I* do not think him good-looking," said Maud, "he has such a hard, confident look, but his features are well enough. I suppose some would call him quite handsome."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"He says his house is a number of miles from here, in the woods, and that he and his father are hunters."

Walter thought of the house where Ralph and he had stopped for a drink of water.

"Of course, you did not notice what kind of a gun he had?"

"Yes, as he was going home with me, he kept boasting of his exploits, and said he had the best rifle in the country. He made me look at it, and I thought that it was the handsomest gun I had ever seen."

"I suppose you haven't discovered his name?"

"Yes, it is Bill Jinks, he says," answered Maud, with just the slightest appearance of archness in her tone and glance, as she noticed her companion's extreme anxiety to obtain all the particulars.

"Is he older than I am?"

"Oh! yes, he must be nineteen or twenty."

"And you have never seen any of his folks?"

"No, and I do not care to. They must be queer people, I think."

"Ralph and I," said Walter, "stopped at a house on our way for a drink of water. There was no one in at first, but presently a woman made her appearance from outdoors and ordered us off. Ralph told me by his signs that he thought a man and his son lived there."

"Oh, I think it must be the very place! You saw no one else?"

"No; but I saw a very handsome rifle. It looked exactly like the one that was stolen from me by the robbers. There is a private mark on mine, but I couldn't get a chance to examine this one, because the woman was so violent."

"How strange if it should prove to be yours!" said Maud. "Dear me! since what has happened we can hardly be surprised at anything. It seems to me that this is a dreadful country!"

"Yes, but I hope it will soon be made better," replied Walter. "The villains will be arrested, and then"——

He was interrupted by the sound of hoofs at a little distance. Both turned quickly, and saw a rider approaching with the body of a deer slung across the back of his horse.

On coming into view from behind a clump of trees which had hidden him, he was so near that the lines of his face could be distinctly made out. It was a youthful face, but with an expression of recklessness that made it repulsive. The fellow had a rifle slung to his saddle, and a pistol in the belt of his hunting-shirt.

"It is Bill Jinks," whispered Maud, shrinking closer to Walter, "and I'm afraid he is bringing that deer as a present to buy his welcome here. He said

something that makes me think so. Of course papa will not accept it, and then the fellow will owe him a grudge, and perhaps do him some injury."

They had commenced strolling towards the house, but the horseman presently overtook them, saluting Maud with awkward civility as he came up, but returning Walter's glance with an impudent, inquisitive leer.

The situation of things had aroused his jealousy, and it was plainly shown in the contemptuous expression of his countenance as he seemed to measure his supposed rival from head to foot.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE REJECTED VENISON.

MAUD'S hope was vain that her rough admirer had not come for the purpose she feared.

"I've brung along a deer fer yer folks," he said, riding up close to her side, "one I knocked over this afternoon, an' I want 'em ter take him."

"I don't think they would care to purchase a deer," replied Maud.

"Purchase! who said anything 'bout purchasin'? I've brung along a deer, an' I want 'em ter take him."

"You will have to talk with my father; he is yonder."

"The' needn't be no talkin'; I've brung him along a-purpus."

Maud made no answer.

"There's some chaps as wouldn't know how to knock over a buck 'f he was right up ter the muzzle of their gun," continued Bill Jinks, glancing at Walter, as if the remark were intended to hit him hard.

Still there was no response.

"'Tain't every cub that can do it," he added. "I could skeer some er these fine fellers ter death in the woods. Ever shot a deer, you chap?"

"Yes," was Walter's reply.

"Must er been by accident, then."

"Yonder is Mr. Mercer," said Walter; "if you have business with him he will talk with you."

"What you got ter say 'bout it?" returned the fellow, insolently. "I can 'tend to *my* business."

"You had better do so, then," said Walter.

The young desperado glanced fiercely at him, but seeming to perceive the impolicy of any violent outburst under the circumstances, he controlled his feelings in some degree.

"Folks has got ter mind what they say ter Bill Jinks," he growled, threateningly. "If yer was ter stop round here long, you mought git chawed up!"

Seeing Mr. Mercer near the house, he quickened his horse's pace, as if to win the advantage of announcing his mission to her father before Maud should arrive with an escort who had no deer to present. Perhaps his notions of courtship had been gained from Indian life, where the successful suitor is generally he who can show the choicest buffalo robes.

"He will not take a hint," said Maud. "A few days ago, he came to our house upon some pretense, while papa was out, and offered me a ring he had brought with him. He seemed to be offended because I would not accept it."

"Was it a valuable one?" asked Walter.

"He called it so. I did not look at it, but he said it was a diamond ring and was worth a hundred dollars."

"A diamond ring!" said Walter. "Where should such a fellow get a diamond ring?"

"Oh, his hands are covered with rings, though I don't know how he gets them. Didn't you notice them on his fingers just now?"

"Yes, I saw that he wore rings of some sort, but I noticed his big earrings most. He fixes himself up in great style. I have seen fellows in San Francisco, right from the mountains, wearing gold drops three or four inches long, when they had no shirt collar and looked as if they hadn't combed their hair for a month!"

"I wonder they don't hang jewels on their noses, too," said Maud, "just as other savages do. It seems as if the more ferocious people are, the bigger earrings they want!"

Bill Jinks went on toward the house, in front of which Mr. Mercer was standing, and our two young friends followed. He was evidently intending to present the slain deer as an offering that should secure perpetual amity between the houses of Jinks and Mercer.

"Howdy, Mr. Mercer?" he said, as he came up. "Pooty fair sort of a evenin'."

Mr. Mercer nodded civilly. "Yes," he answered.

"I've brung along a buck here," said Bill, "that I shot special for yer this afternoon, an' I want yer to take him."

"I don't wish to buy a deer at present," replied Mr. Mercer.

"I don't ax nothin' fer him," said the bejeweled young man; "yer can take him an' welcome."

"No," said Mr. Mercer, "I shall not accept it. The other day, as I understand, you offered my daughter a ring. Had I been at home I should have talked very plainly to you. I warn you not to repeat such conduct, for I shall tolerate nothing of the kind. Please to remember this, and act accordingly."

"But I've brung along this buck that I shot a-purpus," persisted Bill, "an' it's sort er hard that yer won't take him ter 'bleege me."

"Young man," said Mr Mercer, "I wish you could understand English. I tell you that I do not want your buck, and you have only to take it away."

"Well, I've got a buck yere that I shot special and brung special, thinkin' yer mought want him."

"Haven't I told you to go away with your buck?" said Mr. Mercer. "I do not want it, and shall not take it. I have no desire for any further acquaintance with you."

"Some folks gits the name er meanin' bad," said Bill, savagely, "an' I'm one on 'em, which I'm innercent."

"Would you like to sell your rifle?" asked Walter, who had arrived on the spot with Maud, and was trying to get a good view of the gun.

"Me? No, I shouldn't," replied Bill with a ferocious tone, "not to no sich cub as you be! Yer wouldn't know how to shoot a bulldog!"

"If you cannot keep a civil tongue in your head," said Mr. Mercer, "the sooner you are moving the better. These premises are mine, and your presence here can be dispensed with."

The young ruffian put on so dark a look as he heard this, that Walter stepped close to him as he sat on his horse, and stood ready to grasp his arm should he attempt any violence.

"I've brung this yere buck," said Bill, "an' now yer don't want him, an' won't take him."

"I don't care what you've 'brung,'" exclaimed Mr. Mercer, "I have told you that I wish you to leave the premises, and the sooner you do it the better I shall be pleased."

"I could chaw up the whole on yer, in half a min-

ute!" cried Bill, making a threatening movement of his arm, as if to draw a weapon.

Walter had moved to within two feet of his side, and was looking him squarely in the face, with both arms partially raised ready for a spring. But the fellow had intended nothing more than menace. He was evidently a coward, and those steadfast eyes, with the determined will behind them, completely overcame him.

Maud, however, who stood at a little distance, was dreadfully frightened.

"Oh, papa!" she cried, "Oh, Walter!"

"Hush!" said Mr. Mercer, "there is nothing to fear."

"I brung this yere buck," commenced the cowed ruffian, whiningly, "an' now——"

"Off with you this instant," cried Mr. Mercer, "you impudent young scamp!"

"An' now yer don't want him an' won't take him!" continued Bill, finishing out his sentence in spite of the interruption.

Grasping the horse's bridle, Walter turned him from the door, and that not with the utmost gentleness. "Now be gone at once!" he said. "You are an insolent scoundrel!"

Bill seemed confounded by such decisive action, and made no further delay. He might have suspected his two antagonists to be armed, but it was chiefly Walter's peremptory manner that put him down, for such a person has much the nature of the wolf, which somehow always shows a consciousness of inferiority when matched with the house dog.

His malicious feelings, however, found vent, when he had reached what he may have considered a safe distance. Turning in his saddle, he shook his fist at the group behind him.

"I'll chaw every one on yer up," he cried, "young

gal an' all! an' you, yer poor little stuck-up cub, special! I'll let yer know who Bill Jinks is!"

"This is all dreadful!" said Maud.

"No; it is not dreadful," said her father, "it is simply disgusting."

"I wish I could have examined his rifle," remarked Walter.

"Why?" asked Mr. Mercer.

"Because I think it is mine."

"Think it is yours!"

"Yes, sir; perhaps I am wrong, but I can't help feeling that it is the one that was stolen from me when the robbers carried me off."

He then gave Mr. Mercer an account of his adventure at the house in the woods as he had related it to Maud.

"It is possible that you may be right," said Mr. Mercer, "and if so, it is an important discovery. We may find that this young desperado is really of some consequence to us."

"That is what I am thinking," said Walter.

"Still," replied Mr. Mercer, "there are, no doubt, other guns that exactly resemble yours, and so, until you can see the private mark, there can be no certainty."

Walter felt the truth of this, and he saw also that for the present his doubts could not be solved. When all things should be in readiness for a descent upon the robbers, the cabin in the woods might be searched, but he could not help wishing that he had something more than a mere *surmise* as the basis of action in that quarter.

"If it be as you think," said Mr. Mercer, "the advantage to us may be incalculable."

"Yes, sir," replied Walter, "and especially if we could know beforehand without having our knowledge suspected. Something might then turn up that

would help us very much, though, of course, we can't know what it would be."

"Well," said Mr. Mercer, "we will see what the sheriff will propose, though the sheriff is the last man who should be seen near that house until the final swoop."

Poor little Maud was in great trouble, tossed between fear and hope. The danger she thought dreadful, while the chance of the restoration of her father's wealth inspired hopes that quickened every pulse. To see her parents once more in the enjoyment of the property they had lost, and consequently free from the anxiety they now experienced, was her dearest wish; though, of course, she thought also of herself, and was thrilled by the mere posssibility of the return of her former advantages.

In spite of Bill Jink's episode, the evening, for Walter, proved one of the happiest he had ever known. He had never been much in the society of girls; for the last two weeks he had lived in a cave; and now, to come suddenly within the circle of Maud's magnetism, was like plucking a sweet red rose in winter.

He had never felt precisely so in the company of boys, and could hardly understand the subtle influence that appeared so soothing.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A STROLL WITH MAUD.

In the morning Ralph came to inform them that the sheriff, being detained upon pressing business, would not make his appearance until evening; that the necessary force could be obtained at short notice, and that probably a movement would be made upon the cave within two days. Meanwhile Walter must not show himself at the settlement.

"I wonder," said Mr. Mercer, "what will be done about the Jinks establishment? I suppose, however, that will depend much on what we have to say. We have no direct evidence against the family, but yet I think it would be a good plan to search the premises."

"Yes, sir," said Walter; "and, of course, after that there ought to be no delay. I am all the time afraid they will get wind of our intentions, and remove your gold to where we cannot find it."

"As to that," replied Mr. Mercer, "I am afraid it is already where we shall not be able to find it. There are at least twelve of them, you say, and they may have declared dividends long before this, so as not to have a dollar of the treasure where it can be reclaimed."

"That is what I am afraid of," said Walter; "and yet I can't help thinking that they must have some of it in the cave. It seems to me just as if we were going right into a gold mine!"

"Well," remarked Mr. Mercer, "a few days will probably decide the matter. At all events, I shall feel better to be in motion, trying to accomplish something, than to be sitting inactive, as I have now done for the last two months, simply from having not the least clew to the whereabouts of the gang. As to the authorities, they have only turned round and round in a blind way, because they have been unable to gain any definite information."

Ralph was as full of his motions as ever, and he could be brave or merry with them, just as a person can be with his voice. Maud, who had been acquainted with a deaf and dumb girl, could manage to talk with him quite well, and he was delighted to find that she enjoyed doing so. He rallied her upon the conquest she had lately made, branching his fingers above his forehead to indicate the buck with which she was to be purchased, and going through with

various other details in a manner that brought laughter and blushes at once into play, chasing each other over her fair young face.

"Deaf and dumb people," remarked Mr. Mercer, "are very quick to appreciate the notice taken of them. They are jealous and sensitive, and nothing delights them more than to discover that they are making themselves agreeable. It is very natural that this should be so."

It was necessary that Ralph should return to the settlement, and when he was gone, Walter and Maud amused themselves by strolling about the romantic woods and rocks in the neighborhood.

"Only think how short a time it is since we were riding in that stage," said Walter, "and you were telling the passengers what had happened to your father, It makes me feel as if I had been dreaming when I think of all that has taken place."

"I should think it would!" replied Maud. "How I wondered what those men would do to you, and whether you would ever get away from them."

"And I, too," said Walter, "was thinking of you. I wondered how far you had to go, and what you said about me after you got home, and whether I should ever see you again!"

"Oh, I didn't suppose you could be thinking of me!"

"I couldn't very well have forgotten! I remembered every word you said in the stage."

Maud blushed slightly. "And did you expect to escape?" she asked.

"I meant to escape if possible; but I thought that at the worst I should be liberated at last, and I kept thinking I would look for Maud Mercer the first thing!"

"Oh, you remembered my name, then?"

"Yes; and when I told Mr. Percy what it was, he

said Maud was one of the very best names in the world."

"Then you told him of *me?*"

"Yes; and he was very much interested in you."

"How queer! I wonder where he can have come from?"

"That he has never told me, and I have not liked to ask him."

"He found you insensible in the torrent. Oh, how you must have dreaded to make that terrible leap! I should have put my hands over my eyes if I had seen you!"

Walter thought what beautiful eyes they were!

"Suppose you had been killed!" she added.

"But I did not mean to be killed; I thought the thing could be done."

"It would have been dreadful if the hermit had not found you as he did! I am so glad he was there!"

As Maud said this, her pretty eyes expressed all the feeling of her words.

In a deep little dell they discovered a bank of delicious flowers, and while Maud was stooping to gather some of them, her hat was caught from her head by a spiteful branch, which also disarranged her hair. As she was putting her long locks in place, Walter took occasion to ornament them with the woodland blossoms, much to the merriment of his charming companion.

"If you like flowers," she said, "we shall always be friends, for I think them the most beautifnl of anything in the world! I thought boys cared only for guns and skates and base-ball!"

"Oh, they like flowers sometimes," said Walter, as with a little heart flutter he readjusted one which had fallen a little out of place over the low, wide forehead—"they like to see them in a girl's hair!"

"You are a naughty boy!"

"Yes ; but we'll always be friends, you say."

"Oh, certainly! we'll always be friends, because you like flowers!"

"Especially where they are now!" said Walter, archly.

"You!" And Maud blushed a deep, rosy red, laughing meanwhile with the guileless voice of a brook.

When they returned to the house, it was time to prepare for dinner ; and the pretty forest nymph showed what a domestic and practical spirit can exist in the fairest form. Mrs. Mercer was not permitted to tire herself with any details of the work, for Maud's small, shapely hands were everywhere.

"I don't know what we should do without her," said her father, "she thinks of everything, attends to everything ; and yet she has never had any experience of the kind till lately."

"She was always thoughtful, from a child," said her mother, "and so I am not surprised that she does so well. Anything which would please her father and me she was always eager to do."

Of course, this almost involuntary praise she did not hear. The flowers were still in her hair as she did the honors of the table ; and there was a something grateful to Walter's feelings in this when he thought of what she had said about their being always friends.

It seemed as if the faint ray of hope which had just dawned upon the family, had inspired even Mrs. Mercer with new vigor in spite of the apprehensions she had of danger to her husband from any attempt upon the cave. She was now fast recovering from the effects of her illness, and our young lad felt that, when well, she, too, must be very pretty. He guessed that she must be about thirty-five, the age of his own mother ; and, somehow, it seemed to him as if he had

known some person of whom her general appearance reminded him, though he could not tell when or where.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A DOUBT SET AT REST.

While strolling with Maud in the morning, Walter had noticed in the neighborhood some flocks of wood-duck, the drake of which is a very beautiful fowl, showing the finest blending of colors imaginable—red, green, black and buff—and late in the afternoon, he went out with his gun in the hope of procuring some of the male birds.

He found the shy creatures, however, less plentiful than they had been earlier in the day, and so wandered farther than he intended to do.

"I must return soon," he thought, "for the sheriff and Ralph may come early, but then there is time enough yet. I will follow the line of low land to the next pond if it should not be too far, and perhaps I may get a shot at last. I want to show Maud what pretty birds they are."

He had some hope, too, that should the expected visitors come before sunset, he might see them on the road, as the range of ponds he was following lay near the highway, such as it was.

Continuing his course somewhat further, he at length started a clump of the fowl, that went whirring up from a small pool, and had the satisfaction to see four of them drop at the discharge of his two barrels. Three of them were females and not remarkable for beauty, but the other was a superb drake, as handsome as a paroquet, though a very different looking bird.

"How Maud will fall in love with these colors!" he thought. "It has as many and as soft ones as the

rainbow! Now I will get back as fast as possible."

Once or twice since he had been out, he had heard the report of a gun at some distance. He soon struck the road, but had not proceeded far when his attention was arrested by the sight of a huge eagle, which came leisurely sweeping in his direction. He quickly concealed himself, but the noble bird soon made a curve, passing on at too great a distance for a shot.

Walter was about leaving his covert, when the crack of a rifle saluted his ear, and at the same moment he saw the eagle flap its wings spasmodically up and down, while it came to a full stop in mid air. Then suddenly it plunged earthward, apparently stone dead, lodging in the topmost boughs of a dead tree.

From his position our young friend could not see the person who had fired, but hurrying on, he soon found himself near the foot of the tree into which the eagle had fallen, and at the same time discovered a man with a gun in his hand, gazing up at the royal game as if perplexed as to how he should secure it. That man was Bill Jinks.

Bill's eyes were so intently fixed aloft that he did not see Walter, who thus had time to secure a good position from which to watch the hunter's motions undiscovered.

"I ken git yer," said the young backwoodsman, still looking up, "an' I will git yer, or break my ornery neck! Yer don't fool Bill Jinks by droppin' inter no treetops!"

Dead as the tree was, it had a vigorous grape vine clinging to its trunk, which rendered possible what would otherwise have been out of the question.

"It's a tough one," soliloquized Bill, as he prepared to climb, "but I've brung him down so fur, an' I

reckon I ken bring him down furder. I ain't a goin' ter leeve him up thar, by no means!"

He laid his rifle on the ground at the foot of the tree and grasped the vine as a sailor does the shrouds of his ship. The attempt was not only very difficult, but very dangerous. At times he was completely hidden by the broad grape leaves, and Walter could hear the hard green grapes come rattling down the side of the tree as cluster after cluster was torn away by the struggling climber. Several times it seemed as if the effort would be abandoned; for Bill would stop and cling where he was, as if out of breath.

At length the lowest branch was reached, and here he took a long rest. Then laboriously he climbed up from limb to limb, the old decayed wood and bark dropping to the ground as he went. It was an immensely tall tree, and the eagle was still far above him.

The branches were huge and wide apart, so that it was almost as difficult to climb up among them by reaching from one to another as it had been to get up the trunk.

In the meantime, Walter was on tiptoe with excitement. By passing under one or two smaller trees there would be a chance of his arriving at the foot of the one on which Bill was, without being seen by him. He could perceive the rifle lying on the ground, but he wished to examine it without the knowledge of its possessor.

"Now is my time," he said at last; "he is so far up that he will not be apt to notice me, but whether he does or not, I will be satisfied now."

He stole nimbly from his ambush, and was soon under the great tree. The pieces of loose bark continued to fall, but he could hardly see Bill Jinks, the large limbs below him being so in the way.

He fancied that the gun had a familiar feeling to

his hand as he picked it up. What a superbly finished rifle it was! If his, the mark by which he would know it must be looked for very carefully ; for it was an extremely slight one, though no less positive for that.

In putting the weapon on the ground, Bill had soiled the guard with dirt at the very place where the examination was to be made, and Walter had to brush it with his handkerchief before inspecting it. Then he looked keenly at the spot, and smiled with a feeling of mingled relief and triumph.

The tell-tale mark was there, as distinct as it was delicate!

He laid the rifle softly down and glanced up into the tree. He could hear the quills of the eagle rustle as Bill Jinks disengaged the wide-spread wings from the branches where they had been caught ; and as the young ruffian's attention was thus wholly occupied, it was easy to retreat undiscovered.

Soon the dead bird was heard to strike the ground heavily ; and now Bill had only to get down as he could. He descended much faster than he had gone up, and reached the lowest branches before Walter had got far away from the spot.

"Now I am satisfied about the gun," thought our young friend, "and can go back with the suspense off my mind."

Bill presently swung himself under the last limb and again trusted to the grape vine. Walter, turning for a final look, saw the maneuver and then continued his course behind the intervening trees.

He had gone, however, but a few yards when there was a sound in the direction of the descending hunter as if something had suddenly given way. It was followed by a rushing noise among the leaves and vines, ending in a startling thud, as some heavy body struck the earth.

Instantly the boy turned and retraced his steps at a run, forgetting all but that instinct which bids us assist the distressed.

Pausing a little as he approached, and peering in the direction of the dead tree, he saw Bill Jinks lying apparently insensible upon the ground, half hidden by the tangled vine he had brought down in his fall.

CHAPTER XXV.

BILL JINKS AT A DISADVANTAGE.

WALTER approached the fallen man, who was evidently alive, although badly hurt.

"I can do nothing for him," he thought, after a brief examination, "except to go for assistance. Robber or no robber, it will not answer to let him lie here. Yonder is his horse tied under a tree, but it would be impossible for me to lift such a dead weight high enough to put it on a horse's back, so I'll hurry and tell Mr. Mercer, and get him to help me."

He was about to take Bill's horse for greater expedition, when his attention was arrested by a clatter of hoofs in the road; and running a few yards for a clear view, he saw two mounted men approaching, one of whom he discovered to be Ralph.

It took but a moment to attract their notice and bring them to a halt, when Ralph, by his expressive gestures, signified that the person with him was the sheriff. Walter hurriedly related what had happened, including the revelation of the rifle.

"Then the connection of this fellow with the robbers is not to be doubted," said the officer. "We will look at him and see what is to be done."

Proceeding to the spot, they found the young man as Walter had left him, seeming to notice nothing,

but still alive, and, as far as could be judged, with no bones broken.

"Ralph must return for a doctor," said the sheriff, "and in the meantime we will lift the man upon his own horse, and take him to Mr. Mercer's house, as that is only a short distance off, while there is no other for miles."

Ralph accordingly started for the doctor, while Walter and the officer attended to the wounded robber. By the time Mr. Mercer's home was reached, Bill had somewhat revived, but, to appearance, not sufficiently to realize what had happened.

"I think his head is injured," remarked the sheriff. "He was probably stunned at first, and perhaps may recover quite fast after a little time. Of course, he must be one of the robbers, but no one outside must know that we suspect anything of the kind. The discovery of the identity of your gun is very important, because now we shall know just how to deal with the man, and may entrap him into making some disclosures should he recover consciousness."

"Do you think any of the family where he lives will come to look for him?" asked Walter.

"No, not to-night, certainly; and perhaps not to-morrow. No doubt he is in the habit of being out at all times of night and day, either as robber or hunter, and nothing strange will be thought of his absence."

A stimulant was administered, and Bill revived faster than could have been expected, though still somewhat lost in mind.

"Will you let him know who you are?" asked Walter of the sheriff.

"I have not decided yet just how to proceed," was the answer. "Perhaps I may find it best to do so—it will depend on his appearance. It could do no

harm for him to discover what we know about the gang, for I mean to keep him close and to move upon the gang at once."

"I am sorry to have the scoundrel here even for an hour!" said Mr. Mercer, "but it can't be helped, I suppose."

"No," replied the sheriff, "it can't be helped just now. To-morrow, when we go in search of the others, as I intend to do, I will either place men here to see that your family shall not be molested, or will pack him off to the jail."

"Where be I, any way?" at length asked Bill, looking wildly around.

"You are where you ought to have been long ago!" replied the sheriff, sternly. "You are a prisoner in the hands of the law. And more than this, Heaven has begun to punish you for your crimes. *You are sick unto death!*"

He uttered the last sentence in a fearfully sepulchral voice.

"Death!" exclaimed Bill, "I ain't a go'n' to die, be I?"

"I don't know how you are going to help dying," said the sheriff. "Are you prepared for this awful change? We know all about what you have done, and the less you deny the better it will be for you."

"Go'n' to die!" said Bill in a piteous tone; "go'n' to die! No, no! I can't—I ain't fit!"

"See if his feet are growing cold," said the sheriff to Walter, making sure that Bill should overhear the direction.

Walter went through the pretence of making an examination, and then, shaking his head with an awfully solemn countenance, he said:

"I'm afraid you are right, sir; I suppose that is one of the *last signs!*"

The doleful voice was enough to frighten one, to say nothing of the head-shaking.

"Oh," cried Bill, "I tell yer I ain't ready ter die. Git suthin' an' put ter my feet ter keep 'em warm. What be I goin' ter do? Which I dunno how ter do anything!"

"You can repent of your sins," said the sheriff; "you can do that. You can confess your bad deeds; but you must do it very soon. We know all about your gang—all about the robberies they have committed—all about the two caves among the mountains. How dared you to go hunting with a stolen gun—a gun that your folks got when they robbed a stage coach? You see that it has all come out. What a load of crime is sinking you down to the grave!"

The officer's tones were truly awful as he said this.

"I didn't steal the gun," whined Bill; "I wan't with 'em, which they went without me to rob that yere stage. Hinckley got the gun, an' he jest lets me have it when I want it."

"Yes; I understand," said the sheriff; "you don't go with 'em always. Is the robber you live with named Hinckley?"

"Yes; me and him had a row this mornin' an' I don't keer what becomes on him!"

Bill seemed to forget his critical condition for the moment, and spoke spitefully.

"Then how came he to let you have his rifle today?" asked the sheriff.

"He didn't let me have it—I took it—'cause he was gone away."

"Is he gone now?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"Oh, dear!" groaned Bill, "this comes sudden!

Hev I got ter pass in my chips right away? Ain't ther' no chance fer a feller?"

"You wouldn't think there was much chance for you if you could see how you look," said the sheriff. "Don't you feel your face drawn out long?"

"Oh, dear! I ain't fit ter go!" the poor ruffian moaned. "I b'leeve my feet *is* cold—they'm a freezin!"

"Talk quick, then!" said the sheriff. "Where's Hinckley?"

"He's ter the cave, a fixin' up things with the fellers. They'm ter make a big haul ter-morrer night. Oh, hear! my face is drawed down longer'n er mule's, an' my feet——"

"Go on—what sort of a haul? Your sands are running!"

"Ther's a lot er gold comin' out er the mountains private. They don't know which way the stage 'll take, 'n they'm to watch for it in two places, six on 'em in er place, so's ter make sure."

"So there are twelve of them in the whole?" said the sheriff. "That's the entire gang, is it?"

"Yes; 'cept old Eli Stark."

"And where's he?"

"I dunno."

"Were you to take any part in this?"

"Yes; only I had a flare up with Hinckley this mornin', an' told him I wouldn't go."

"Why didn't Hinckley take that rifle?"

"'Cause Number One wants it—Number One's Bill Stark—and Hinckley don't want Bill ter know he's got it."

"Oh, a theft within a theft," said the sheriff. "They tell us there's honor among thieves, but the rule don't seem to hold always."

He then proceeded to ask the wounded robber a variety of other questions, and got from him a good

description of the two places where the stage was to be waited for. Bill knew the region well, and so did his questioner, and the points indicated had certain prominent landmarks.

Between his groans the fellow acknowledged that he had been with the gang off and on for some months ; and he said that they seldom left any one at either of their dens when they went out upon an expedition. They had much gold, he believed, concealed in the larger cavern, but the smaller cave was of little consequence. As to Mr. Mercer's treasure, he knew nothing of that.

Late in the evening, the doctor came, and upon making an examination, said that the patient had received a severe shock, but would soon recover from it.

"I will send a team for him in the morning," said the sheriff, "and have him taken to the jail, if it should be your opinion that he can be moved."

"Oh, yes," replied the doctor, "he will be able by that time to ride well enough on a mattress, and Mr. Mercer probably does not wish to entertain a sick robber longer than he can help."

So it was settled that the sheriff should return to town by daybreak the next morning, dispatch the wagon for the patient, and then prepare everything for an expedition against the robbers—his plan being to surprise them if possible while they should be lying in wait for the stage.

One of the most important revelations of Bill Jinks was that of the passwords used by the gang, as it was hoped that the knowledge of these might be turned to account, especially as the robbers would be divided into two parties.

"I hope," said the sheriff, "to deceive the desperadoes in such a manner that each party of them shall take my company for the other. I am afraid there

will be lives lost at the best, but this plan seems the most promising of any. Of course," he added, "we might take possession of the cave in their absence if we could find it; but Walter would not be able to go directly to it, and we might spend so long a time in the search that the enemy would be likely to take alarm. I suppose that on leaving it vacant, they cover the entrance in such a way that a person standing within arm's length of it would have no suspicion of its existence. If our young friend here saw Bill Stark go in and leave the hole open, there were probably others out whom he expected to follow him."

"I suppose you will take me with you to-morrow," said Walter.

"No, my boy; I must positively refuse to do that. It will be no place for a boy of sixteen."

"And can I be of no use to you?" asked Mr. Mercer. "I have much at stake, and wish to take an active part in the matter."

"No, sir," returned the sheriff, "you can be of no use at present. You must not go. Your health is not good, and I want the most hardy men I can get. My force will be sufficiently large, so that there will not be the least need of you."

Mrs. Mercer and Maud looked exceedingly relieved. Mr. Mercer himself saw the rationality of the decision, and acquiesced in it; but Walter, who had all along looked forward to this climax as a scene wherein he was to take an active part, felt disappointed.

"You will have chance enough for action," said the sheriff, "when we come to examine the cave."

"Yes," added Mr. Mercer, "we owe the advantages which we now have, solely to what has been discovered through your means. Let this satisfy for the present, Walter, for you will probably have enough to do by-and-by."

Upon the sheriff's return to town, the wagon he

had promised was sent out, and Bill Jinks was removed to the jail, though no hint was dropped that he had made any revelation.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN EVENING CALLER.

"WHAT a hurry I am in to have it all over with!" said Walter; "I am so much afraid that something will go wrong!"

"But your going with the sheriff and his posse could not have done any good," replied Mr. Mercer.

"Oh, no, sir; but I am in a hurry to know what their den contains. I am afraid old Eli Stark may get wind of the movement and take some means to secure the treasure."

"So am I," said Mr. Mercer, "but I am still more afraid that the attempt to capture them will fall through. It will require great shrewdness, great determination, and great good luck."

"But I like the sheriff's plan," said Walter. "His party will be masked just like the robbers, and so each division of the gang may be deceived."

"The fact that they will be divided," remarked Mr. Mercer, "is a very favorable circumstance; but even with this advantage, it seems to me that it must be almost impossible to capture them without bloodshed. Such a result would be really and truly marvelous!"

"How glad I am that neither of you is to go!" said Mrs. Mercer.

"It would be dreadful!" said Maud, with a shudder. "I would rather they should not be arrested than to have papa get into such danger—or—or Walter either—or any one!"

"I like adventure," observed Walter, "and so

would have been glad to go; but I am willing to do what is for the best."

"You have the right kind of courage," replied Mr. Mercer. "You have the courage which can dare to remain out of the combat when necessary. If Marmion had left the Lady Clare in your charge at Flodden, you would not have pitched into the battle as Blount and Fitz Eustace did. Your kind of courage is superior to theirs. Perhaps you may recollect Milton's line—

'They also serve who only stand and wait.'"

"Yes," said Walter, "I remember it; but I think waiting is the hardest of anything. I didn't care about showing my courage, but I wanted to help. When the robbers took me prisoner, I told them what to expect. I meant to do all I possibly could to bring them to justice, and I was in hopes of recovering your gold. I don't care about the credit of it; I wish it to be done—that is all—and then I shall be satisfied."

"Whether this attempt of the sheriff shall be successful or not," replied Mr. Mercer, "a dash must be made upon the cave forthwith. As Eli Stark will still be at large, it will be very important to get ahead of him and secure whatever treasure the place may contain."

"I wonder if he will get any knowledge of this expedition against the gang!" said Walter, anxiously.

"Just as likely as not he will, for nobody knows where he may be," replied Mr. Mercer.

"But if he shouldn't get it in time to give them notice——"

"Oh, in that case, his aims would be only to secure the treasure and make his escape with as much of it as possible."

As the place where the robbers were to lie in wait for the stage was nearly twenty miles off, it would be necessary for the sheriff and his cavalcade to start before dark. The day was passed in great suspense at the Mercer household.

"I wonder if they have set out yet?" said Walter, as it grew towards night.

"Very likely they have," replied Mr. Mercer, "and now I shall be anxious till I hear from them. To-morrow morning we shall know the result."

"I hope Bill Jinks will be able to go with us to the cave," Walter remarked, "but even if he should know where the treasure is hidden, I don't believe he would tell."

"No, probably he would not; but I do not believe he can know. He is little more than a boy—a mere apprentice in crime—and would not be trusted with such a secret."

"I think, though," said Walter, "he is an apprentice that promises well for his masters, except that he don't know much."

"He is as ignorant as a mule," said Mr. Mercer, "and, I think, naturally malicious. Probably no reliance can be placed on his word, but he may, nevertheless, be of some use to us."

"It makes me nervous," said Walter, "to think the sheriff may fail, and the robbers may make their escape."

"Yes, I know—but then they would be chased up without loss of time. This would be all important."

"But I am afraid that old Eli Stark will never be found," remarked our young friend, dubiously, "and he is the very one of all others that Mr. Percy wishes the law to get hold of."

"There is occasion for great anxiety," said Mr. Mercer. "I do hope that everything will work well.

Personally I, perhaps, have more at stake than any one else."

"It is the thought of your gold," said Walter, "that makes me uneasy—there is so much between us and that! I believe suspense is the hardest of all things to bear. I feel just as if I would like to fly like a bird and find out all about it at once."

"Well, we will go the station very early in the morning," replied Mr. Mercer, "and see how matters stand. There will be no further necessity for you to keep in the background, probably, as of course after this stir everything will come out."

"The night will seem very long to me," said Walter, "but I suppose there is no possibility of hurrying things."

As it grew late in the evening, the tramp of a horse was heard near the house, and Mr. Mercer, on the alert for news, hastened to the door. The rider, however, was only a stranger, in want of a drink of water. As he came to the door, he was seen to be apparently a youngish man with black whiskers and mustache.

Catching sight of Walter within, he seemed to start as if surprised, and even while drinking, continued to glance toward him keenly.

"Thank you kindly for the draught," he said to Mr. Mercer, and then turning his horse, rode away after a few more remarks.

"That stranger has a something in his appearance that I do not like," observed Mr. Mercer, as he came in and shut the door.

"Nor I either," said Walter. "I didn't see much of him, but I don't like his voice. I wonder who he can be?"

"He paid you a compliment," said Mr. Mercer; "said you were a fine-looking young man, and wanted to know if you were my son. Then he asked

your name, but I answered merely that you were a friend of ours."

"I don't know what gave me such a feeling," said Walter, "when I heard his voice, but somehow it made me detest him!"

"I hope *he* isn't a robber!" said Maud.

"He isn't any of those whom I have seen unmasked," rejoined Walter, "but lately I have learned to suspect almost all strangers."

"And so have I," said the young girl excitedly, "ever since I met that wretched old man in the stage! I should know this one again by his black mustache and his fierce looks, and should be afraid of him, too!"

"Oh, we must not take all strangers for robbers," said Mr. Mercer, "though I do not think that bad people tell us what they are the moment they come near us."

"But, papa, that wicked old man didn't!"

"No, he didn't tell *you*, I admit; but perhaps he would have told a more experienced person."

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN INFIRM WIG.

GREAT was the stir which Mr. Mercer and his young guest encountered next morning when they made their appearance at the settlement. The sheriff met them with a smile of intense satisfaction.

"Everything has worked to a charm!" he said. "I can hardly realize my good luck; it was one chance in a thousand! I was afraid the thing would go wrong, but it was the best plan I could devise, and it has succeeded beyond my expectation."

"How many of them have you got?" asked Mr. Mercer, while Walter was on tiptoe with eagerness.

"The whole twelve! Every one! Not a soul got away!"

"Was any of your men hurt?" Walter inquired.

"Yes, a few of them were wounded, but not mortally. We deceived the fellows just as I had planned —six at a time—and sprang upon them before they had time to do much shooting."

"But there must have been a severe struggle," said Mr. Mercer.

"Yes; there was something of a struggle. We approached the first party, pretending to be their comrades—we were masked and had their passwords. They began to inquire what we had discovered, and why we had left our hiding place, when all at once the only six of us who were in sight rushed upon them, while the rest of my men, who were close in the rear of the robbers, sprang forward to our assistance. The other party was secured in the same manner."

"And so you have lodged them in jail?"

"Yes, just locked them up; and I'm half afraid the people will try to lynch them."

In his joy at the result, it hardly occurred to Walter that he himself had been the chief instrument in bringing the villainous gang within the meshes of the law. Much as he had previously discovered, it was solely the recovery of his rifle from Bill Jinks and the consequent confession of that young outlaw, which led to the immediate capture of the robbers. But all the knowledge of them which he had otherwise obtained, could now be utilized at once. Since the day when Maud Mercer told her sorrowful story in the stage-coach, he had made the apprehension of the desperadoes, and the recovery of the one hundred thousand dollars, his prime motives of action; and now the first of these objects, joined with so fair a prospect of attaining the second, filled him with a tumult of excitement.

"Oh, Mr. Mercer," he cried, "I do believe you will get it! We must go right away to the cave! Old Eli Stark is out somewhere, and, of course, he will get wind of what has happened. We ought not to give him any time."

"You are right," said the sheriff, "every hour is precious to us, and I shall start for the place to-day. I am told that Bill Jinks can't leave his mattress, so we shall have no help from him. Ralph knows the way to the mountain, but I shall have to depend upon you for the rest. Do you think you could go straight to the cave?"

"I think I could soon find it," said Walter, "if Ralph should find the mountain. I would take the course I took before, for I know what course *that* was."

"All right; we'll put you down there," was the enthusiastic reply.

As to Mr. Mercer, his conflicting feelings of hope and apprehension almost overpowered him. But Walter felt only a grim determination to succeed, joined with a firm faith in his ability to trace again the course over which he had followed the two hunters. In his brain there were confused visions of courts of justice, and piles of gold; and he was burning with impatience to be again on the spot where he had seen Bill Stark shoot the puma.

"Hello!" exclaimed the sheriff, as a man on horseback came dashing up to him with eager haste, "what's up? Anything broke loose?"

"Yes," said the messenger, "we have just heard that a stranger who was seen about here this morning has been discovered to be a suspicious character. He had a black mustache and black whiskers, and looked like a young man. But a boy has just given the information that a mile or two out of town he saw this man going off at full gallop. He says that

the fellow's hat blew off into a thicket, and that in going into the bushes to get it he had his mustache turned away round to the side of his face, and lost off a wig that he wore, so that his head was left bald. He looked then like a man fifty years old. When he saw the boy close to him, he jumped on his horse and made off again."

"How long ago was this?" demanded the sheriff.

"An hour, perhaps."

"Then we can't catch him, whoever he may be; he has too long a start."

"He must be the very man who stopped at my house last evening!" exclaimed Mr. Mercer.

"Yes," said Walter, eagerly; "and that man was old Eli Stark! Oh, how sorry I am that he has made his escape!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FOLLOWING THE FUGITIVE.

"You are sure that he is old Eli?" said the sheriff.

"Yes, I am quite sure," replied Walter, "it was Eli Stark's voice that I heard last evening. I didn't recognize it then, but it was a voice that gave me a disagreeable impression, and now I know that it was exactly like his."

"Then we must lose no time in following him," was the reply. "Of course, he will reach the den in advance of us, but he must be allowed as small an opportunity as possible to make his arrangements. I have not slept since night before last, and am tired almost to death, but that makes no difference, I shall start at once."

"There will be no time for me to see my family before setting out, I suppose," said Mr. Mercer.

"No; you can send them word how it is with us,

and if you think it necessary, they can have company to protect them till your return."

"They will be lonesome and timid," said Mr. Mercer, "for my wife is not well, and my daughter is very young. The thought of what has occurred will make them nervous, especially as they are not used to staying alone at night."

"I will send out my two boys," said the sheriff, "the lads will be company for them at least."

"Thank you," said Mr. Mercer, "I shall be greatly obliged."

This matter arranged, he felt easier, and Walter, too, was glad that Maud would have company—glad also that the two lads, aged respectively sixteen and eighteen, were not remarkably handsome.

Fresh horses were procured, and the party, numbering fifteen, set out for the wild interior. The sheriff said it would expedite matters if they were to discover on the way the smaller cave to which Walter had been conveyed on the night of his capture ; but this there seemed little hope of doing without too great a loss of time. While our young adventurer, however, was raking his brains in the effort to recall the landmarks he had noticed at the time of his escape, the prints of a horse's hoofs were discovered crossing the tracks of the party, and looking off in the direction in which they led, the lad fancied that the very path he had taken in his flight.

"I am sure it must be yonder," he said, "and not far off. Old Eli has taken it in his course, perhaps."

"Yes," said the sheriff, "these are the tracks of his horse, without doubt, and we can loose nothing by following them. He may possibly be at the place."

The tracks were soon lost, from the nature of the ground, but presently a spot was discovered where a horse had been tied to a sapling, and close by was a

singular pile of rocks which Walter saw with a thrill of exultation.

"This is the place!" he cried, "I ran out from between those rocks at the time I got away from the robbers' cave!"

Hurriedly the explorers went climbing the difficult path till they entered the den itself. It was soon examined in all its windings, but nothing of value was discovered.

"They would not have hidden their spoils in a place like this," the sheriff remarked. "Old Eli has simply made a flying call here and gone on again. But I am glad we stopped at the place, for now this will be off my mind. We have only the other cavern to attend to; there is where the gold is."

By the time the party was again fairly under way it was past sunset, so that all that could be done was to reach the mountain side not far from where Walter had fallen in with the two robbers, and there encamp for the night. Both men and horses were extremely tired, and besides it would have been useless to attempt the tracing of such a labyrinth in the dark.

Ralph had thus far pointed out the general course, but from this moment all must depend upon Walter, the only person of the company who had ever seen the mouth of the cave. He felt the responsibility thus devolved upon him, and could not help fearing that he would not be able to go directly to the spot even by daylight, it was so singularly protected by rock and chasm and thicket.

With the dawn of day the exciting search was entered upon. Walter led the way, looking all the while for the spot where he had lain in ambush and seen Bill Stark kill the mountain lion. Knowing what was expected from him, he had a nervous dread of blundering, and thought how mortified he would be should he actually get lost as he had done when

last near this spot. Then, however, it was night, while now it was day.

At length, just by his horse's feet, he discovered the skeleton of an animal newly picked by the wolves; and looking a little above the place, he recognized the small rock and bush which had concealed him on the night when the puma mewed close to his hiding place, and when the report of Bill Stark's gun startled him by its nearness.

It was a happy discovery, for he felt that now he would know how to proceed. He led the party along the intricate way, by which he had followed the robber less than a week before; but there were so many divergencies that he was sorely perplexed. Things do not look in the daytime as they do at night. It soon became necessary to dismount, and the men, fastening their horses to the bushes, groped their way about the strange, wild place, looking everywhere for the doorway which would let them into the mountain.

But the exact spot was more difficult to find than any one had anticipated; and Walter felt his perplexity increased by a consciousness of the impatience of his companions, and the thought of what they hoped from him as a guide.

"You are sure this is the place?" said the sheriff.

"Yes, sir, quite sure. Here is where I followed Bill Stark, and the mouth of the cave cannot be a dozen rods from where we stand."

All the rocks, chasms and trees, however, were so supplemented by others that it was impossible to remember which way the robber had turned from any given point. Some of the party squeezed themselves into fissures, some climbed tall cliffs, and some crept under fallen treetops. Some kept on much farther than necessary, and then retraced their steps.

Walter felt exceedingly nervous. Was he to be

foiled at last? What would the sheriff say? What would the men think of him? Again he stopped and cast his eyes sharply about. A sudden thrill of joy shot through him. He sprang forward a few steps; there could be no mistake.

"Mr. McGregor!" he called to the sheriff.

"Ah! what is it?"

"Come here a moment if you please."

The sheriff was instantly at the boy's side.

"See anything that looks like it?" was the officer's hurried question.

"Yes, sir; I see the entrance itself. Can *you* see it?"

Mr. McGregor turned his head in all directions.

"No," he said, "I can't say I do."

Walter stepped along a few yards, and then indicated a certain spot from before which he removed a dead branch or two.

"What would you call this?" he asked, pointing to an opening in the rock which came into view as he moved the branches.

"Walter! you're a trump!" cried the sheriff. "I do believe you've found it!"

"This is the place," said Walter, "where Bill Stark went into the mountain. Here is where I first saw the light of his lantern. You see a man can hardly squeeze through, and everything around it is calculated to hide the hole."

"No wonder it perplexed you, my boy," was the reply. "You have done nobly to find it at all! Now for the lanterns, and next we'll see how the place looks inside."

The whole company gathered about the spot; the lanterns were lighted, and then one by one the party entered the narrow opening, the sheriff leading the way.

Mr. Mercer was tremulous with excitement as he

thought how much might be decided within an hour. Was he to return to his little family a rich man or a beggar?

CHAPTER XXIX.

DISAPPOINTMENT.

In the darkness of the cave old Eli Stark might be hidden, and probably no one of the explorers took a step without thinking of him. Not that he would be very dangerous in the face of such a force, but then the idea of rousing a human monster in the bowels of the earth has in it something startling.

"First of all," said the sheriff, "I wish to settle the question as to whether the gang made their headquarters here or not. If they did, we shall find beds, stools, tables, and other things that they must have had. We will find where they have eaten and slept, if we can, and thence take our 'departure,' as a sailor would say, in quest of the treasure."

The formation of the cavern appeared very favorable to the purpose of the searchers, for the floor was level, and the walls, so far as could be discovered, were smooth.

At length a place was arrived at which the robbers had evidently used as their especial house and home. Here were made beds of gathered leaves, over which were spread the skins of various wild animals, recalling to Walter the thought of what he had seen in the hermit's cave; and there were, besides, a roughly hewn table and a dozen clumsy stools. Eatables and drinkables were discovered in abundance.

"The scamps lived well," said the sheriff; "look at this smoked venison, this flour and corn meal; and above all, at these bottles of choice liquor. Here is a quantity of coffee and tea; here are some sweet po-

tatoes ; and here are rice and raisins. Oh, but they had no intention of starving ! "

But now arose the great question of the treasure. Mr. Mercer's hopes fell as he saw nothing like "wedges of gold," nor anything likely to contain such.

There were several lanterns found, and these were now lighted in addition to those that the party already had. The effect was to make the cavern for a considerable space around as light as day ; but beyond was utter darkness.

"As we move about, every man with a lantern," said the sheriff, "we shall, of course, carry the light with us, but we shall at the same time be blinded to everything at a few yards distance."

"How would it do," asked Walter, "to explore the sides first, and find how large the cave is before searching for the treasure ? "

"That is what I will do," said the sheriff, "then we shall have some correct idea of the place. It is just possible that old Eli Stark may be hidden in some part of the cavern ; but I don't believe it. I think he would not have risked such a thing ; he would have been more likely to take what treasure he could carry and decamp to some other hiding place."

Walter's heart sank ; he had feared this. And must he go back to Maud Mercer with the sad intelligence that her poverty was a thing assured ? that all he had done, however it might assist justice, could not assist *her ?*

The party was divided, and while one half of it went carefully groping to the right the other wing turned to the left. Here and there the walls were irregular and broken, and in some places deep, gloomy aisles led off at right angles to the main cavern ; but all these were found to be only of small extent, and

the lanterns so lighted them up that it seemed as if nothing they contained could possibly remain undiscovered.

At length the divisions of the explorers met, having traversed the entire circumference of the cave. Neither party had anything encouraging to say to the other. The place, for a large cavern, was unusually free from difficulties, and easy to be explored. All the walls had been viewed in the strong glare of the lanterns, all the intricacies explored. It remained only to look carefully over the body of the underground room, crossing and recrossing the wide chamber, to make sure that the stone floor should be thoroughly examined. This was done, but with an utterly barren result.

Then the fifteen persons, separating, continued the search each on his own account; and the sight of fifteen lanterns, scattered here and there in the otherwise pitchy darkness, and moving about like phosphorescent substances that sometimes float above a deep swamp in the evening, had a strange and weird effect.

Yet only disappointment was the result. If old Eli Stark had visited the cave since his flight from the settlement, he must have removed everything of value, provided any such thing had been there. But it began to look as if this had never been a repository of treasure.

"There is, certainly, no other chamber connected with this," said the sheriff, "except such nooks as we have explored; and there seems to be no place in any of the walls where a large amount of specie could be stowed. They are solid and smooth, with the exception of a few small crevices hardly wide enough for a bat to hide himself in. The robbers made this their home, there can be no doubt of that; but their booty is quite another matter; they may never have

brought any of it into the place. At all events, if it was ever secreted here, it has been taken away, and, probably, by that old fellow who got the start of us yesterday."

Walter glanced toward Mr. Mercer, and could not help pitying him, as his pale face showed the reaction of that hope he had so lately indulged—a hope much stronger than its possessor had dared to admit, even to himself. It was now by no means probable that any portion of the lost property was to be recovered at present, and as to future chances, the thought of them was little better than despair.

All manner of questions presented themselves to the foiled searchers. Might not the gold have been hidden under some of the huge rocks outside? Might not one of the walls of the cave be simply a natural partition between this and some other cavern whose entrance was somewhere in the mountain side?

How far did the few little crevices reach? Walter put his hand into one of them, but it would not admit his arm. He held up his lantern and peered in. The rent, narrow as it was, appeared to be very deep. He could not help imagining another chamber beyond; and if there were one, how awfully solemn it must be, he thought. But the sheriff would have laughed at his quaint fancy of another room behind that solemn wall, and he himself dismissed it as an idle whim.

Over and over again, the same walls were examined, the same dark caverns explored. Towards night some of the party went pushing about among the outside rocks and thickets, in the hope that the entrance to some other den might be discovered; but it was now so late that not much could be done in this way. It was seen that the place had so many queer rocks, so much tangled brushwood, and so

many uprooted trees, that a thorough investigation would be very tedious.

"We will remain here until to-morrow," said the sheriff, "then spread out and look along the mountain side and in the deep gulches below. I shall want you, Walter, to pilot me to the cave of your old friend the hermit. Perhaps he will not care to have me visit him, but I can't help that. I would like to know whether he has discovered anything since your absence, or if he can suggest any course of action which I have not thought of yet."

He knew, from our young friend's description, how sensitive Mr. Percy was upon the subject of visitors; but duty was duty, and he was not without his curiosity besides.

"I should be glad to see him," said Walter, "and tell him what has taken place. I'll go to his cave to-night, if you have no objection. Probably Ralph would like to go too, and between us I think we could find the way without much difficulty. Ralph knows these mountains and forests wonderfully well, and I can easily tell him where it is that we want him to guide us."

"It would be well enough to do so," said the sheriff. "Go and tell him we have got all the robbers but the old man, but can't find a bit of treasure. Upon second thought," he added, "I think I will go too. I suppose a couple of hours' travel will take us there—or less, if we are to ride."

"I guess the horses would be an encumbrance," said Walter. "On foot we shall be able to make short cuts, and I don't think it can take us very long, though I'm not quite sure of the distance."

He found Ralph willing to start at once, and without more ado the three set out upon the tramp, arriving at their destination before it had grown very late.

CHAPTER XXX.

A STRANGE INTRUSION.

MR. PERCY had been ill, and so obliged to remain inactive, but he was now better. His pleasure at the return of his young guest was heartfelt.

"You cannot think how much I have missed you," he said. "Indeed, I have been led to doubt whether I really make a good hermit after all!"

He welcomed Ralph with the old, expressive gestures, and the sheriff with grave courtesy.

"You may be a little surprised at my visit," said the officer of the law, "but circumstances render it necessary. I did not know but you might in some way assist me. I have had the good luck to get my clutches on all the robbers except one, and he, I think, has fled to this mountain."

He then gave a detailed account of what had happened, to which the hermit listened with intense interest, expressing great satisfaction at the successful swoop upon the gang, and admiration of the manner in which it was accomplished.

The escape of Eli Stark, however, vexed him thoroughly.

"It is too bad," he said, "and yet it is in the natural course of things. I have thought that if any one should escape it would be he; though, in fact, I had no hope of so prompt an arrest of the others."

"Would Eli be apt to remain about the mountain?" aked the sheriff.

"Yes, provided the gold is here."

"You think he would not be likely to separate himself from that?"

"No, he would not. Where the gold is, there is he."

"The old villain!" interjected Walter; "just to think how he came right where I was without my knowing him!"

"So you think, Mr. Percy," remarked the sheriff, "that if we were to find the treasure we would find *him?*"

"I do. He could not have carried off so large an amount of gold as it is probable the robbers have secreted; and, besides, you have followed him so closely as to leave him little time to make arrangements for escape. He would sooner run a great risk of being caught than go off and leave the gold. I know him well enough to venture that opinion."

"Walter has told me," ventured the officer, "that he believes you formerly had some knowledge of him."

"Yes."

"And that you have been a sufferer from his villainy."

"Yes; but I would choose not to speak of it at present. I am thinking only of the possibility of his capture."

"But where can he be?"

"Somewhere under the mountain."

"We have explored the cave thoroughly."

"Oh, no doubt of it; but then there may be other caves. I have been here for years, and yet there is much for me to learn about my surroundings. Probably a great many strange tunnels were left when the Sierras bubbled up into their present shape from the fires beneath."

"The cave that we have been examining to-day," remarked Walter, "has crevices in its walls that seem to run very deep. I could not help imagining another cavern beyond; but I suppose that was a mere fancy."

"Oh, the wall is solid enough," put in the sheriff,

"it hasn't a loose stone. You know we examined every foot of it."

"And yet Walter may be in the right about an adjoining cavern," replied Mr. Percy. "I am prepared to believe almost anything in that direction."

"And you think," said Walter, "that the mountain ranges were thrown up by fires in the earth?"

"Undoubtedly. There was once a time when the earth's material was red hot. It boiled and bubbled like molten iron, gradually cooling and hardening. Probably *all* mountains were once volcanic. Yes, even the most insignificant hill was thrown up in the same manner as Coatzacoalcos or Chimborazo, sputtering and smoking long after the valley about it had been reduced to quiet."

"And then the caves," said our young friend, "were formed, you believe, just as vacuums sometimes are in substances that we melt and boil?"

"Exactly. How else could they have come?"

"I could never grasp such an immense stretch of time as this must have taken," said Walter. "How awful it all seems."

"Yes," replied the hermit, "the lessons of geology are solemn and grand beyond conception. Even in times comparatively modern, great changes have taken place. The cave now closed may once have admitted the mammoth—we cannot tell."

The more practical sheriff showed no great interest in a conversation reaching so far beyond old Eli Stark, but Walter would have been glad to prolong it.

Seeing that both Mr. McGregor and Ralph were very tired, the hermit showed them the sleeping accommodations which, almost unnoticed, he had prepared since their arrival, and they were soon comfortably snoring. Ralph in particular sounded his

nasal trumpet outrageously, and roared like a puma with the toothache.

"I should think the jar would wake him," said Walter, who still sat up talking with Mr. Percy, "though of course the noise would never disturb him."

The hermit spoke feelingly of Mr. Mercer and his family, inquiring into every particular, and expressing the deepest regret that there should be so little chance of finding the lost treasure which all were so anxious to find.

"I wish I knew the extent of this cave," he said, "and whether it has any outlet elsewhere."

"It may go quite through the mountain," said Walter, "and who knows but the robbers may have discovered some way of getting into it at the other end?"

"But in that case why should they have made their home in a separate cavern?" queried the hermit at this point.

"Perhaps it was more convenient," replied Walter.

"True; that would have been a good reason for their tactics."

"It could do no harm to go in and explore beyond the lake," was the lad's remark; "then we should know."

Mr. Percy said this would of course be done, provided the next day's search outside should prove fruitless, however little hope there might be of success.

Walter felt much at home as he threw himself on a bearskin, close under the rock wall; yet it was a long time before he could get asleep, for the events of the past few days had all to be passed in review, and the chances of the future to be considered and re-considered, while the puffings of Ralph and the

sheriff came in fitful responses to his thoughts of the missing gold.

He slept at last, however, forgetting the dear old hospitable cavern and all the fancies that had been chasing each other through his mind. It must have been near daybreak, when the soundness of his slumber was broken by a partial return of consciousness, accompanied with that queer sensation which one experiences when neither asleep nor awake. It was a sort of day-dream.

But this was not all. He had a vague nightmare impression that the place contained one occupant too many. In fact, he seemed to see this occupant, though unable for the moment to move or call out.

The condition of drowsy bewilderment, however, was very brief. His mind struggled to arouse itself, and suddenly the nightmare feeling was gone. Opening his eyes with a full consciousness of what was passing, he fixed them upon the figure of a man who seemed to have just issued from the depths of the cave, and who stood revealed by a dim lamp which the hermit had allowed to burn through the night. If the person had brought a lantern it had been set carefully down behind, as a matter of precaution.

Ralph and the sheriff still snored, puff, puff, puff—snort, snort, snort—and Mr. Percy, too, was sleeping as soundly as they, though he made less noise about it, for he was not of the puffing kind.

The intruder advanced as stealthily as a cat in an unexplored cellar, and seemed every moment on the point of turning to retreat. Evidently he was both surprised and alarmed at the discovery he had made at that moment.

"Puff—snort," went the sheriff; "snort—puff," answered the deaf and dumb man; calmly and

deeply breathed the hermit. The unannounced visitor shot a quick glance towards each, then moved a foot backward and was prepared to retrace his steps. A few minutes more and he would be hidden in the labyrinths of an almost limitless cave, and pursuit would be hopeless.

Suddenly he discovered that Walter was lying awake. Our young friend felt a pair of large, owlish eyes fixed full upon his own. It was the most thrilling moment that the boy ever experienced. All that he had been striving for—all that his friends had hoped for—might depend on a single effort then and there. He hesitated not for an instant, but sprang upon the intruder!

CHAPTER XXXI.

A MORNING EXERCISE.

THE spring that Walter gave was quick and powerful. He clutched the bear-skin on which he had been lying, and in a moment it was wrapped around the man's head as if hurled by a tornado. Then the two struggled fiercely together; but the lad had the advantage, as his enemy was not only blinded but in a manner pinioned by the heavy blanket that wrapped him about, and which his young and nimble assailant took good care should not be thrown off. Though but sixteen, the boy was strong, and he now exerted his powers desperately to overcome his hated antagonist.

The stranger fumbled for a pistol, but Walter caught it first, and dashed it across the cavern. Then whirling around they went, the man with his head still in a "bag," and his arms but partially free, and the lad clasping him about the shoulders and trying to trip his feet. Not a word was spoken, and very

little noise was made—in fact, not half as much as came from Ralph and the sheriff, who continued to snore on, in total ignorance of the strange scene that was passing in the cabin.

At length down the two gladiators went upon the stone floor, Walter uppermost. Then Mr. Percy awoke, and of course instantly discovered the fight that was in progress.

"Walter, Walter!" he cried as he sprang up, "what is the matter? What is going on? Who is that man?"

"Oh, nothing," said the boy, still struggling to maintain his advantage, "only I have old Eli Stark here under this bear-skin!"

"Old Eli Stark!" exclaimed the hermit, springing forward to join the rough and tumble scene, "old Eli Stark! Impossible! Mr. McGregor! Mr. McGregor!"

But the sheriff had already stopped snoring, and was coming with a bound from his couch. He was at home in affairs of this kind.

For a few moments old Eli kicked vigorously and struggled to free his arms; but upon perceiving how useless the contest was, he presently gave it up. The first precaution taken by the sheriff was to examine the prisoner for weapons, and he was surprised at not finding any.

"I threw his revolver across the room," said Walter, "and his bowie, too, is somewhere about the floor."

Our young friend was almost out of breath from his exertions; the perspiration streamed from his face, and he was glad to feel the current of fresh air which came in through the doorway of the cave, which had been left open through the night, from the heat of the weather.

Mr. McGregor looked for his coat, the pocket of

which contained a pair of handcuffs ; while Mr. Percy and Ralph, the deaf and dumb man having now been aroused, kept a fast hold of the captive, who seemed to be quite resigned to his fate, and made no effort to escape from his captors.

"Bother the coat!" said the sheriff, "I have forgotten where I threw it." But he quickly found it and produced the manacles.

Old Eli, though he stood up, seemed limp and powerless, hardly able to keep his feet. He appeared not to notice anything about him, but to be completely unnerved by exhaustion and despair. Mr. Percy, however, was not deceived by these signs, nor was Ralph ; they thought their hold of him secure, for they fairly grasped the old culprit's flesh as well as his clothing.

How it was done they could never have explained ; but in an instant, like an exploded can of dynamite, Eli Stark was gone from their grasp! He struck each of them a quick blow as he whirled about, and then, through the narrow doorway, and out into the open air, he shot like an escaped wolf.

It was still quite dark, and there was great difficulty in following him as he dodged among the rocks and trees at a breakneck speed. Walter had been nearer the door than any of the others, so that the old robber when he made the plunge had fairly dashed him against the wall ; nevertheless, he was the first out in pursuit.

The wily fugitive zigzagged as much as possible, as this would give him advantage in the dark. Sometimes his pursuers seemed almost to surround him ; when suddenly, by crashing through a bush or darting around a rock, he would gain a momentary start. The chase, however, could not be long, as Walter could easily outrun him, whatever the others might have been able to do.

Still, the pursuers found their task by no means an easy one. Old Eli, though not a very swift runner, was as wiry and cunning as a fox, and was putting forth all his strength and skill in this last effort for his liberty.

"Head him off!" cried the sheriff, whose wind and patience were nearly exhausted.

"Here he goes!" shouted Mr. Percy.

And then rushing footsteps could be heard, with the crackle of brushwood or the rattle of loose stones. In some places it was pitch dark, and in such he more than once hid behind the tree trunks.

Twice Walter caught the old man's clothing, and twice it was wrenched from his hand. The last time, the robber struck him a heavy blow which for the moment staggered him.

"Hold on to him!" cried the sheriff.

"Don't let him hurt you!" called the hermit, full of regard for Walter's safety.

Instantly the boy was again in hot pursuit, and prepared to grasp the desperate criminal for the third time.

But old Eli had made his final effort. A chasm, which he did not see, lay direct in his course, and he plunged headlong into it. Luckily the fissure was not so wide but that Walter, who was only a few feet behind, easily overleaped it. Then he turned to look at the fallen man.

Eli Stark's head and body had struck the stones with terrible force, and he lay insensible. Walter's three companions came up. Poor Ralph had labored under the disadvantage of having to run by sight alone, while the others had a part of the time run by sound.

"Do you think the villain is dead?" asked Mr. Percy of the sheriff.

"No, he isn't killed so easily! He is badly hurt,

but I guess he'll come to. Nothing but a slip-noose and a trap door with a nine-foot fall will stop such an old scamp's wind for any length of time."

"What is to be done with him?" inquired the hermit.

"Oh, we'll make a litter, and carry him on it to your cave."

"Yes, we might do that," was the reply.

"This finishes them up," said Walter, "but I'd no thought it would be done so soon, when they had me prisoner, though I meant to do my part towards it."

"How came you to discover this man, and where had he come from when you tackled him?" asked the sheriff.

"He came out of the main cave; and he was about getting back there when I threw the bearskin over his head."

"Why didn't you call for help before you made any movement?"

"Because I thought he would run into the cave, and perhaps give us a great deal of trouble—he might know of some way of escape that we knew nothing of."

"I think you were right," said Mr. Percy. "Had he escaped into the cave, he would have had every advantage, and might easily have shot some of his pursuers. Besides, if he could get into it by some secret passage, as he must have done, he would be able to go out the same way."

"It is not likely that he went in by your entrance," said the sheriff. "He certainly would not have ventured to do so."

"No, that is out of the question. There must be some other way of getting in. This old wretch, in wandering about, may have got lost and found his way to my part of the cave by accident. It puzzles

me, however, to account for his being on this side of the lake."

"Perhaps the robbers may have been acquainted with a part of the cavern for some time," suggested Walter. "They may have had some means of paddling about on their side of the lake, though perhaps they never explored the whole of it. I feel sure that this cave of yours is the same as the one in which the robbers lived. They occupied one end of it, and you the other, and the middle is filled up with that wonderful lake."

"That is quite probable," said Mr. Percy, "but I hope we shall soon solve the mystery."

Not a word was said of the stolen treasure, though all were thinking of it. Eli Stark was conveyed to the cavern, and laid, still insensible, upon a couch. All had passed rapidly, and it was not yet sunrise.

Unfortunately, however, the sheriff, at the very moment of reaching the hermit's door, was seized with a weakness of the spine, brought on by his exertions, joined with a misstep he had made, so that he was hardly able to move. Walter and Mr. Percy had to carry him into the cave, and carefully lay him down upon one of the beds.

"I shall not get over it for the next fortnight," he said, with vexation. "I have had the same before."

"Oh, dear!" thought Walter, "how many more delays are there to be?"

He ran into the main cave and found the lantern which Eli Stark had set down there before venturing out.

Our lad's excitement was now at fever heat. What of the lake and the canoe? Would another canoe be found by the side of Mr. Percy's? Was there not a shore beyond that solemn pool where the

hundred thousand dollars of Mr. Mercer's, and other golden piles, lay concealed?

He passed into and out of the smooth alley-way, impatient and nervous, feeling that he could hardly bear to wait longer to know the whole truth.

"I've found the lantern," he said to Mr. Percy, "and I'll see if I can find anything else. Perhaps I shall hit upon a line of gold eagles dropped to mark the way."

"Perhaps so," replied the hermit, absently, as he was attending to old Eli's case. The old robber still lay motionless and insensible, and Mr. Percy began to fear that he might be "playing possum" again.

Walter returned to the inner cave and went in for a short distance—stopped—went a little further—then further still.

"I'll keep on to the lake," he said; "it won't take long, and I guess Mr. Percy will not be alarmed about me."

At the start he had taken with him the canoe paddle, but even now he did not expect to use it. He would simply try to discover by what means the robber had crossed the water.

CHAPTER XXXII.

WALTER UPON THE LAKE.

It was not without a feeling of awe that Walter traversed the long and silent aisles so far from the light of day.

Yet he was almost glad to be alone. The very sense of his loneliness bore him up—it was such a grand and solemn thing to be thus plunging all by himself into the deep heart of the earth, leaving the daylight and the open air behind him.

As he descended gradually towards the lake, and

looked upon the immense and shining walls about him, he thought of what he had heard the hermit say of the "center of gravity," where an elephant would be no heavier than a flea; and from which all directions must be "up," without any "down," just as all must be south to a person standing at the north pole.

Most boys would have hesitated and turned back, as if fearful of meeting some undefined personality representing the Spirit of the Cavern; but Walter had nothing of this feeling. He thought only of the dark grandeur of the scene, and how the roots of the great cedars above must now be pointing directly towards him.

"I cannot be far from the lake," he thought, at length, "and I'll soon discover if old Eli has meddled with the little canoe. Then I must hurry back, or Mr. Percy will begin to fear I have got lost in the cavern."

As such reflections were passing through his mind, he seemed to detect a light ahead, and setting down his own lantern, he advanced a few paces in the dark to make sure. He could now see it plainly.

It appeared like a bright red star, and remained motionless at a point slightly below his own level and not very far away.

"What, and where can it be?" he asked himself. "I will leave my lantern where it is, and go on till I can discover the meaning of it."

He approached it cautiously, with a vague apprehension that, after all, there might have been more robbers than had been bargained for. Brighter and brighter it grew, but still continued immovable in the same spot.

Suddenly a happy thought flashed upon him that made him smile.

"It must be a lantern that old Eli left to guide his

return," he said. "Yes, that's what it is, sure enough!"

Stepping hastily forward he found it, indeed, to be a lantern placed in the bow of a canoe which had been hauled high and dry out of the pool, to await the robber's return.

"But this isn't Mr. Percy's canoe," he said; "it is different in every way. It must have belonged to the robbers, and that old man crossed the water in it."

At a little distance he discovered the hermit's canoe, remaining as he had last seen it, close beside the subterranean lake.

And now came reflections of the most exciting nature.

Must not the robbers have been well acquainted with the cave on the other side of the pool? And hence, was it not almost certain that they had there deposited the one hundred thousand dollars, the loss of which had reduced Mr. Mercer and his family to a distressing poverty?

Oh, how Walter's heart glowed at the near prospect of its restoration! After all her uncertainty, all her anxiety, what happy news there might be for poor little Maud—and that too, so very soon!

He looked off upon the black lake, and the longing to launch forth upon it grew almost irresistible. The darker and more solemn it seemed, the stronger was its fascination.

But should he obey the impulse—what would Mr. Percy think had become of him? He knew that should he be long missing the good man would become alarmed for his safety, and would fear that he was lost.

He walked along the shore of the pool, and saw no end of the water.

Overhead there were bright, starry spots where

the stalactites glowed in the roof, but underneath all was darkness.

At length he perceived, through the prevailing blackness, a something at a distance that at once drew his whole attention. It was a small light, as steady as the ray from a lighthouse.

"Another lantern!" he cried. "Another of old Eli's beacons! I am decided now! I am going for that gold without a moment's delay!"

He had at the first lighted all the ingeniously contrived lamps attached to Mr. Percy's canoe, and now, leaving two others burning behind him, he had only to push off upon "the melancholy flood," though not with that grim ferryman whom poets write of.

It surprised him to find how slight an effort would cause the light thing of bark, in which he was, to shoot rapidly along, as it glided farther and farther into the region of "Chaos and Old Night."

The lamps he carried threw a broad glare over the black water, while their rays were constantly reflected by the myriad crystals above, that sparkled as if the whole roof was hung with jewels such as royalty itself never wore.

It proved a long distance to the spot whence the light he had discovered was shedding its gleam; but at length he reached it, and stepping from the canoe, he experienced something of the feeling which must have inspired Columbus at St. Salvador—for he had discovered a new world, and as he hoped, a golden one.

Soon, however, upon looking about him, he felt his hopes sink.

He had reached only an island of smooth rock in the midst of the lake, and of very small extent. It was evident that no treasure could ever have been concealed in such a place.

No beacon was to be seen beyond. Should he return or go on? He decided for the last with very little hesitation, and set his face forward.

Pushing again out into the darkness, yet with the assurance that there remained the friendly lanterns astern, he continued his course.

Soon before him he beheld solemn and gigantic pillars that, rising directly out of the water, appeared like enormous supports of the roof.

He could see them quite distinctly, as the glittering crystals that hung from them like icicles gave back the glare of his lamps.

Presently he found himself in a narrow and tortuous strait, and lost sight of the light behind. Still, however, he kept on, believing that he could retain a good idea of the way of return.

In a few minutes the strait was passed, when again, to his great relief, he discovered a light ahead.

How well old Eli Stark had marked the way! Those underground people had possessed a store of lanterns, and with these they had overcome the difficulties of such dark navigation.

Apparently the solemn lake lay all unbroken between himself and the new beacon; but the roof was now very low, and some of the seeming icicles almost touched his head.

At one spot he was surprised to discover above him an immensely deep fissure, through which he could see the sky.

It was like gazing up from the bottom of a well, for though it must now be broad daylight in the upper world, he could see the stars look down upon him as he paused under this strange opening in the vast rock.

He judged that it was not less than five hundred feet to the top of the prodigious chasm.

"Old Eli never came down that way," he thought; "it would have been like lowering himself from one of those stars!" And he was quite safe in the conclusion, for the vast tunnel was really awful.

It showed him, however, that he could not now be under the highest part of the mountain, as in that case the opening must have been thousands of feet deep instead of only hundreds.

He had approached its rugged and shelving side, where the weight of its mighty roof was gradually lessening.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE ISLAND IN THE LAKE.

WALTER'S attention was now attracted to a queer phenomenon. It began to seem as if the dark atmosphere about him were full of life. Myriads of swift shapes came whirling about his head, and once or twice he felt them graze his cap.

They appeared to start out from the roof as the canoe moved along with its flaming lamps, just as flies are driven from a ceiling by a torch held close beneath them.

He could not help fearing that they might strike him fairly in the face, as they went noiselessly flitting by; for they circled and ducked about like leaves in a whirlwind, and he could feel the fanning of their wings.

It did not take him long to discover that these creatures were bats; and he thought the roof must have been completely lined with that living mass. Indeed, he soon began to see them hanging head downwards in every direction from the rock over his head.

"I hardly think they have all come down that long hole," he said; "they must know of some other

way to get in. I guess the shell is getting thinner very fast."

The beacon he had last discovered was at length reached, and he perceived that the spot it marked was a very singular one. Here the roof was once more high, with pillars and broken walls rising all about like the ice shafts of a berg floating in the Arctic seas.

Exploring the place where he had landed, he found that this, too, was an island, though very unlike the other.

Is appeared to consist of mingled earth and rock, with great inequalities of surface. There were huge loose stones lying here and there, and everything indicated changes of which nature alone kept the history.

The young discoverer presently stumbled upon two or three half buried objects, large and yellow, and having the appearance of bones. In spite of their immense size, he finally concluded that they were so, for he was unable to imagine what else they could be.

"Certainly, then," he reflected, "the cave could not always have been as it is now. The bed of the lake must have been dry, and somewhere the cavern must have had a very wide mouth for these enormous creatures to enter."

Not far from the bones he came upon another relic still more interesting, for it was a tusk seven or eight feet long, which he lifted with unbounded curiosity. He found that it was undoubtedly the tusk of a mammoth.

Here, then, the vast mammoths were wont to come, in ages when, perhaps, a dim light might have held the place of this solemn darkness. Young mammoths might have been born here, and how many huge skeletons of the race might be hidden forever

under the unknown depths of the subterranean lake!

To Walter there was a weird enchantment upon every side; but uppermost in his mind was the thought of the object for which he had come; and he wondered if the robbers could have found a better place to conceal their treasure than this dark island in the wide pool.

With a lantern in each hand he traversed it slowly and searchingly. Of course old Eli Stark must have explored it, but had not the others known of it too?

Presently, at a spot where there was a trace of earth, he came to a full stop and bent eagerly to examine it.

A number of faint human footprints were visible, and he perceived that they varied in shape and size. They had evidently been made by several different persons.

"It is plain that a number of the gang have been here," he said, "and I'll look for more signs of them just as carefully as I can."

He passed on, scanning the ground foot by foot, peering into every hollow, and measuring every loose stone with his eyes. At length he paused abruptly, and setting down his lantern, picked up some fragments of rock. What had struck him about them was the appearance they had of having been lately chipped off. On the ground there was a little stone dust.

His heart beat fast. Where was the block from which they had been hewn?

The search, for a time, was almost microscopic; then the faint outlines of a heel print led the eager seeker to concentrate his efforts upon a spot near it, till at length he came upon a large stone, which a close examination showed to have been hammered a

little upon one end. It would weigh five or six hundred pounds, and was firmly wedged in its place.

Here was one of the most exciting discoveries possible—for this work of human hands had a look of newness, and seemed to have been recently placed in the position it now occupied.

"Here is the gold!" was the boy's glad exclamation. "I am sure I have found it! Oh, Mr. Mercer! Oh, Maud! what a story I shall have for you!"

But as he looked again at the huge stone his heart sank—for, much as he longed to make assurance doubly sure, he could see no means of doing so.

In addition to its great weight, the rocks on each side held it where it was.

"A man with a crowbar," he reflected, "might pry it up; but I have not even a stick—though a stick would be of no use, to be sure."

He looked about for some implement which the robbers might have concealed, but nothing of the kind could be found.

Then he thought of the huge mammoth tusk, and with infinite labor dragged it to the spot; but the end was so blunt that he could get no hold of the stone with it. His big lever would slip and fall down, and then he would tug to lift it again, with the perspiration almost blinding him.

"It's of no use," he said, "I cannot do it! I'll sit down and rest a little, and then paddle back as fast as possible to tell Mr. Percy."

He seated himself with his back to a rock, and wiping his hot forehead, thought of the strange situation in which he found himself.

"Here I am," he mused, "three or four miles under the earth, trying to pry up Mr. Mercer's gold with the tusk of a mammoth! What would Maud say, could she know of it? Wouldn't her eyes grow round and large if she were to look into this cave?

I guess they would! But they could never be any prettier than they are already!"

The thought of what probably lay beneath the great stone was almost more than he could contain, and made him desperately in earnest in his endeavors to raise it. But they were in vain.

"The robbers have never lived here," he said to himself, "but I suppose they discovered this cave, and saw that it would be a good place to hide their booty in. The entrance must be a very small one, I think, and no doubt they have covered it in some artful way."

Loath as he felt to leave the spot until the last doubt should be solved, the necessity appeared inevitable, and with reluctant steps he returned to the canoe.

But the fascination of his strange and dark surroundings still held him.

"I wonder what there is beyond?" he said. "I wonder how far the lake reaches? There must be 'main land' somewhere, just as there is in the upper world. I'll keep on for a short distance, at least."

So he paddled leisurely, stopping often to look up at the pillars and vast walls, till the lights he had left astern were out of sight, and he was once more alone in the dark cavern.

"I must go back," he thought, at length, "for I don't know what sort of a predicament I am getting into. Now where is the light? Where is the island? Which way have I come?"

He sat still in the canoe, looking first this way and then that.

Was he indeed lost? It must be so. The little craft swung slowly around, and he had not the least idea in which direction the head should be pointed.

All beyond his small circle of light lay in pitch darkness, and he was liable at any moment to find his craft in contact with some jagged rock.

As he sat thus, he could not help getting the impression that the canoe was being carried slowly along without any effort of his own.

He judged so from the appearance of the walls nearest to him, where the stalactites kept constantly changing as the lantern-light seemed to move along.

What could it mean? Was there a tide in this apparently tideless lake? Was there a mysterious current setting toward some equally mysterious point?

Was the canoe to go away down to the center of the earth upon some cold, dark river that men had never dreamed of?

The boy struck his paddle vertically into the water. It was only three feet deep.

"I couldn't touch bottom a little while ago," he said, and he wondered if the end of the lake might not be close at hand.

As he peered about him, he suddenly made a discovery of great interest.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AGAIN UNDER THE OPEN SKY.

A LONG, thin streak of twinkling light was what Walter saw.

It seemed to extend from the bottom of the cave to the top, losing itself in the roof. Everywhere else there was inky blackness; but this streak was as if a midnight cloud had been cut in two so as to admit a line of light from the horizon almost to the zenith.

He paddled directly under it, and at the same time could not help feeling that a current was helping him along.

Presently, close down to the water, he could see a spot a number of feet wide full of star-like glimmer-

ings, as if the side of the cave were there almost like a sieve.

In a few minutes he found the canoe in contact with what he perceived to be the dead branches of trees.

These he cleared away with some difficulty, and then his little craft was carried by the current among a thick growth of reeds.

The roof of the cave was very low at this point, and Walter had to bend down in his canoe to avoid striking his head against it. But a little way ahead of him he could see the daylight glimmering.

Less than a hundred yards further on, he reached the mouth of the cave, where the stream flowed forth from its subterranean fountains into the open air.

Looking up in astonishment, Walter saw the broad sky, and perceived that on both sides of him there were thick green trees under which the current still made its way till it emerged into a small, deep mountain pool.

Getting out upon the little water sheet of perhaps an acre in extent, he found that this in its turn emptied itself into a swift stream.

The cluster of reeds through which he had just passed, completely hid the outlet of the cave, and other clusters were growing here and there about the small lake.

No one would have thought of looking in such a place for an opening into the mountain, and the robbers must have discovered the passage by accident.

Magellan, on passing the strait which admitted him into the Pacific, could scarcely have experienced the triumph which Walter now felt. Paddling quickly to the shore, he climbed the mountain side, in order to get something like a correct idea of his position; and here, standing upon a high rock, he had a toler-

ably good view of the region upon which he had emerged.

"If the sheriff's men have scattered themselves along the side of the mountain," he said, "I may get sight of some of them."

He gazed in every direction. "The problem is to know which way to go," he thought. "I have just come out of the earth, and everything has a strange look to me."

But in a few minutes he started with a thrill of joy. Far off he had caught the sound of a human voice, as of one person calling to another at a distance.

"They are about here somewhere," he said to himself. "Hello! hello! helloo-oo!" he cried, putting his whole vocal strength into the call.

"Hello!" came in response.

And a moment later two horsemen came in sight, as they suddenly emerged from a clump of pine trees on the mountain side not far below the spot to which Walter had scrambled.

"There they are!" he exclaimed. "I see them. Hello!" And he leaped up and waved his cap. The men saw him and turned in his direction, while, getting down from the rock, he ran to meet them.

One of the two horsemen proved to be Mr. Mercer and the other the sheriff's deputy.

In a few words Walter made them acquainted with his discovery. Mr. Mercer fairly shook with excitement.

"Why," said the deputy, "there is a crowbar in the robbers' cave, the very thing we need. I handled it yesterday. I will go and get it, and we will soon find what there is under the stone."

He rode away, promising to be back in half an hour.

Meanwhile Walter and Mr. Mercer eagerly discussed the discoveries that the former had made, and

the chances of recovering the lost gold which the boy believed was under the great stone on the island.

"Oh, I'm almost sure the gold is there!" said Walter to Mr. Mercer. "I know some treasure must be there."

"But you say that you lost sight of the light upon the island before getting out," said the anxious man. "Perhaps it will puzzle you to find the place again."

"No," replied Walter. "I know now how it is. The lake narrows to a crooked passage, and when we get beyond that, we shall see the light."

The deputy soon returned, bringing with him the crowbar.

"This implement looks like business," he said; "and now we will go right to the island in the lake and try our luck."

The canoe would easily carry three, and Walter, although too brave a lad to indulge a foolish vanity, certainly did feel a strong sense of self-importance as he proceeded to navigate it, as if he were the Charon of that dark lake!

Sure enough, when the crooked strait had been cleared, the small specks of light were observed ahead.

"There it is," said the young navigator; "that is the island, and both my lanterns are burning. We have only to go straight ahead now."

Mr. Mercer was amazed at his surroundings. The awful mass of darkness, the solemn walls, the glowing crystals, the black, silent lake—all combined to strike him with astonishment.

He seemed to have left the real world, and to have become the plaything of some wild and marvelous dream. Even the bats that flitted close to his head had something of the weird and supernatural to his imagination.

"Why, Walter," he said, "the idea that you should have navigated such a lake in this pitch darkness all alone, seems too strange to be true! It is one of the most surprising feats I ever heard of!"

"I suppose," said Walter, "that after the robbers found the entrance, they made a canoe and went paddling about here, but I guess old Eli Stark is the only one of them that ever discovered the other shore."

"Probably," said the deputy, "as he was hidden here he concluded to explore the place."

"You are sure the stone you saw had been placed there by design?" remarked Mr. Mercer, anxiously, seeming to fear some mistake after all.

"Oh, yes, sir," said Walter, "you will see that this must have been the case. If I could have got that old mammoth tusk under it, I could have pried it up myself."

CHAPTER XXXV.

UNEARTHING THE TREASURE.

THE moment Mr. Mercer and the deputy looked at the stone they saw that Walter was right. It must have been put in its position by human hands. Mr. Mercer shook all over from the excitement of his nerves.

He was not in a rugged condition, and the strain of expectancy and doubt proved more than he could easily bear.

As to the sheriff's officer, he was also shaky, as almost all men are in the presence of great mysteries which they seem on the point of solving. Perhaps, too, he might have felt a something like superstition, —for no doubt he had heard or read of strange phenomena in connection with buried treasure.

The iron bar was put in place, and the two men threw their weight on it, Walter being unable to assist, as it was not long enough for three. The stone, however, did not move ; the rocks at its sides so wedging it as to make the resistance very great.

They rested a moment, then tried once more, and with more vigorous efforts than before. They strained and tugged with all their strength at the crowbar, and at last it seemed as if they were making an impression upon the huge rock they were trying to raise.

"Ah!" said the officer, "it starts!"

"Or the bar is bending," said Mr. Mercer, "I don't know which."

But at this instant a strange reverberation rolled through the cavern, seeming to start successively from a hundred places along the walls and roof.

It was impossible to say in what direction the sound had originated, for it was everywhere ; and at last it died away in hollow groans as if the sides of the cave were full of spirits, who had been called forth from their hiding places by the bold intrusion of the explorers.

"What was that?" asked the deputy, startled nearly out of his wits.

"I'm sure I don't know," replied Mr. Mercer. "It sounds like an earthquake. I hope the roof isn't going to fall in on us!"

For a moment or two none of the party could guess at the origin of the mysterious and awful sound.

"It can't be anything connected with the treasure, can it?" asked the officer. "I've heard of such things, but 'twill take something pretty strong to make me believe in 'em!"

"No," returned Mr. Percy, "we need not fear that the robbers' gold is guarded by goblins or ogres. I have lived too long in the hollow of the mountain to

believe that they are inhabited by any supernatural beings."

Walter was the first to suggest a solution of the puzzling mystery.

"I can guess what it is," he said. He had some reason to suspect the truth, and taking up Mr. Mercer's gun, he asked permission to fire it.

The report was answered by countless echoes ; and when these had died into silence, there came a peal like the one first heard—starting from a long way off and reverberating like thunder on all sides.

Of course there was no longer any doubt as to the nature of the sound. It was caused by the firing of another gun.

"Mr. Mercer has come to look for me," Walter said, "and he is firing his gun to let me know he is here. Probably he knows I did not take any gun into the cave with me, and I think the answer must surprise him."

"He may take us for more robbers," said the deputy, "and go back."

"Oh no, sir, he will not go back without first finding out what has become of me. He will see our lanterns and keep right on for us."

Sure enough, a light was seen approaching like a jack-o'-lantern ; but the three eager toilers did not intermit their struggle with the stone, which began to show signs of yielding.

When at last the bar had raised it a few inches, Walter seized the big mammoth tusk, and lifting it with all his strength, thrust the point into the opening. It went well under the stone, and made a capital lever.

Then throwing his whole weight upon the outer end Walter instantly pried up the heavy slate to an angle of some forty-five degrees.

"Oh, Mr. Mercer!" he cried, "I do believe it's

there! Please to hold the lantern, quick! There's a box or something!"

But at that moment the mammoth tusk turned over, with the bend the wrong way, and down came the obstinate stone, wedging itself as tightly as ever, and once more covering whatever it was that had been entrusted to its keeping.

"There! if that isn't too bad!" cried Walter. "I don't know but some ghost *is* guarding it sure enough!"

"That tusk is a good thing to pry with as long as it keeps right side up," said the deputy. "Next time we'll get hold and try to keep it from turning over."

Walter was eager to narrate his wonderful experiences to the hermit, who was now heard approaching the island.

"Mr. Percy! Mr. Percy!" he shouted at the top of his voice.

"Hello!" came back through the darkness. "Is that you, Walter?"

"Yes, sir; and I'm all right. Mr. Mercer and the deputy sheriff are with me. Do come and see what we've found!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

GOLD!

Ralph, who had performed his mission, accompanied the hermit. As Mr. Percy landed, Walter hurriedly explained to him what had taken place, and why he had ventured upon the expedition so abruptly.

"I had no idea of it when I left you," he said, "but I kept going on and on towards the lake, hardly knowing how far I was getting; and at last the sight

of the lantern, away off in the dark, made me launch the canoe."

He was too well-bred to forget, even in his excitement, what was due to the feelings of his kind friend, whom he had left without warning, and he apologized for any anxiety that might have been caused by his sudden disappearance.

Mr. Percy, however, assured him that no harm had been done, and that he fully approved of the course the boy had taken.

"And so you think the treasure is under that stone?" said the hermit.

"Yes, sir; it certainly is. We have got a glimpse of a tin box at least."

"There can be very little doubt about it," remarked the deputy sheriff.

"I think," said Mr. Mercer, "there is stolen treasure here of some sort—but what and how much is the question."

As he spoke he continued to eye Mr. Percy sharply. The long, flowing beard and hair gave the hermit an extremely wild appearance as seen by lantern light in the depths of the dark cavern. But the earnest glance fixed upon his features read something which this outward disguise could not hide.

Suddenly Mr. Mercer addressed the hermit with a voice full of emotion.

"Gerald! Gerald!" he exclaimed, starting forward with outstretched hand, "is it possible that this can be you?"

"Yes," said the hermit, grasping the extended hand warmly. "I am Gerald without doubt, but I had no idea you would know me here. I am glad to see you, Edmund, truly glad!"

"I thank you, Gerald!" replied Mr. Mercer; "I know your warm heart. And so you have been living a hermit all this while! How stupid I have been!

Walter called you Mr. Percy, and yet it never occurred to Isabel or me that the name of her brother was Gerald Percy Graham!"

"Isabel?" thought Walter, "that is Mrs. Mercer's name, and Maud's name is Maud Isabel—I saw it written in her books."

"Oh, Gerald!" said Mr. Mercer, "I am sorry you should have taken your trouble so to heart. You ought not to have shunned the world so. No one who knew you believed you guilty of what you were accused. You have warm friends, and you have wronged both them and yourself by hiding from them in the manner you have done.

"Yes," he added, turning to Walter, "your Mr. Percy is Mrs. Mercer's brother, and so I feel privileged to lecture him soundly."

"Perhaps I deserve it," said the hermit. "I often thought I must be the oddest mortal alive!"

"But what about this big stone!" said poor Mr. Phillips, the deputy sheriff.

"Oh, yes; the big stone!" said the hermit, whom we must now call Mr. Graham, though it seems as odd for us to do so as it did to Walter.

"Yes, yes; the big stone!" supplemented Mr. Mercer. "Why, Gerald, in meeting you, I've half forgotten what I came here for, though my all depends on the result."

"I have thought of you," said Mr. Graham, "thought of you night and day, since our dear young lad here told me of what had happened to you. If you should recover your loss it would do me almost as much good as it would you. Your poor little Maud, too, how I have thought of *her!* You know how I used to hold her on my knee."

"I know, Gerald, I know! And you may be sure she has not forgotten you.'

"There—now, I'll get hold with the crowbar

again," said Mr. Philips, the deputy, "and we'll give the thing another trial."

Ralph, who possessed great weight and strength, laid hold of the implement with him—Mr. Mercer standing by with small chocks to make sure of every inch that might be gained; while, at the same time, Mr. Graham and Walter lifted the mammoth tusk ready to thrust it forward at the proper moment.

Up, up, an inch at a time, came the reluctant stone, and Mr. Mercer put his thin chocks under it as it rose, fearing that it might drop back into its bed at the will of some invisible guardian of the place.

As soon as the opening beneath was sufficiently wide, the end of the tusk was inserted, and then the cover rose fast. When it had been raised to a proper angle, it was seized by as many hands as could lay hold of it and tumbled over upon the ground.

In the cavity left exposed, there was revealed, first of all, a stout tin box with the cover closely soldered on.

Although heavy, it was not remarkably so for its size.

"That's not filled with coin or bullion," said Mr. Phillips; "it contains something lighter. It would hold three hundred pounds weight of gold."

Next came four wooden boxes of a size much smaller—perhaps a foot long and six inches wide. Walter enthusiasticly grasped one of them, thinking to toss it out upon the ground—but some attraction beneath seemed to be holding it down.

"My goodness!" he exclaimed, "what's the matter with it? I must be weak if I cannot lift a little salt box!"

"Salt box indeed!" said the deputy sheriff. "It would weigh a hundred pounds! There are thirty thousand dollars in it if there is an ounce!"

The remaining three were removed, each being of about the same weight as the first.

Under these were four tin boxes precisely alike, each being about twelve inches long, six wide, and four deep.

Mr. Mercer trembled more than ever as he caught sight of them.

Seizing the crowbar, he pried them apart from each other, got his fingers beneath one, and lifted it from its bed. Small as it was he had to tug heavily at it.

Then he grasped one of the lanterns and held it close down to the lid.

The name of "Edmund Y. Mercer" was plainly to be seen, stamped into the metal.

His face grew pale as death, and he had to sit down on the side of the hole, just as if he had made one of the most painful discoveries in the world, instead of one of the most joyful that he could possibly have made.

Walter was fairly wild. The weight of the boxes became as nothing to him. Leaping into the cavity, he threw out the remaining three as if they had contained only feathers.

"Each of these four," said the deputy sheriff, "must weigh at least eighty pounds. If they are filled with gold, they must contain altogether not less than a hundred thousand dollars."

"That is just what they did contain when they left my hands three months ago," said Mr. Mercer. "I see that the lids have been cut open and resoldered since then, but the *weight* is here certainly, and I don't think that all this pains would have been taken to secrete a quantity of *lead!*"

"That is your gold," said Mr. Phillips, "there can be no doubt of it. I think there is no necessity for opening the boxes here. The four wooden ones con-

tain a still larger amount—belonging, probably, to several different parties, and representing as many robberies. As to the big tin one, *that* has watches and jewelry, stowed in very carefully, and with the lid soldered to keep out the damp."

"May I try one of your boxes with my knife?" asked Walter of Mr. Mercer—for he was burning with impatience to see the contents.

"Yes," replied the overjoyed man, "if you can cut through the cover, do so, and remove all doubt."

Walter applied his knife to the hard lid, and worked away with all his strength. I don't know whether or not he curled his tongue out of his mouth as boys sometimes do when putting their whole mental and physical powers into such work; but, at all events, he sueceeded at last in making a long cut through the tin.

In went the knife blade; he pried the gap wider, while his four companions, bending above him, held their lanterns close down to the box. There was no mistaking the yellow glow of the contents; it left "no loop to hang a doubt on."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE INJURED ROBBER.

The question of transportation was next in order.

"These eight boxes of gold would probably weigh more than eight hundred pounds," said the deputy sheriff, "and here are five of us besides. The two canoes would be sure to spill us, gold and all, if we were to put all the treasure on board and get in ourselves."

"I'll run no such risk," he said. "We must take a part at a time, and go out with it the way we came in."

"Yes," said Mr. Phillips; "then we can get ropes and stout bags from the robbers' cave, and sling all the boxes upon the horses."

"In that way the thing could be managed well," said the hermit. "I don't know how much the canoes would carry, but the navigation is dark and dangerous, and we must be very careful."

The plan was followed out with the utmost caution; the treasure was safely deposited on the shore of the little water-sheet outside, and the requisite materials for transporting it were brought from the robbers' cavern.

In the meantime two more of the sheriff's posse were discovered, and these being trusty men, the golden freight would have a respectable escort around to the hermit's abode. With the four horses the transportation could be easily accomplished. As to the canoes, they were left where they were, hauled up among the reeds.

"What a queer place that pond is," said the hermit, as the party rode away; "a person might paddle a canoe almost into the mouth of the cave without discovering it."

"Yes," said Walter; "and I should never have found it from the inside if it had not been for the current that took me along there. The water moved just a little—not much—and I thought it must have an outlet."

"You have made a strange voyage," said the deputy, "especially for a boy. Your nerves must be rather strong. What did you think when you were in the middle of that lake with pitch darkness all around you?"

"I thought I'd go on to the next lantern," replied Walter, "and see if the gold was there. I had the gold in my mind all the time, for that was what I had come to look for."

"And so you tried to pry it up with that old mammoth tusk."

"Yes. Oh, you don't know how hard I worked to get hold of the stone with it, but it wouldn't hold on!"

"I would have liked to see you!" replied the officer, laughing.

"We shall have all the geologists in the country here soon," remarkd Mr. Graham.

"How do you suppose a mammoth ever got into such a place?" asked the deputy.

"Oh, that was easy enough. You may have noticed that the rock outside has a loose, broken appearance. I think that a portion of it has at some period slipped down, almost closing an entrance that was once very wide."

The deputy probably thought what a fine thing it is to have learning.

The success of Walter's exploration had been so complete that the lad could hardly realize it; and he felt surprised that his sense of satisfaction should not be more overpowering than it was.

Mr. Mercer probably experienced the same feeling; for we are able to contain only a given amount of joy or grief, and he could hardly realize the wonderful change in his fortune.

The hermit said that Eli Stark was reviving when he left him, but that he had the appearance of having been badly hurt inwardly.

"I don't believe he can recover," he said, "and I have a great desire to know what he will say in case of his coming to a full sense of his condition."

"So you think he will hardly get around to the penitentiary," remarked Mr. Phillips.

"Hardly. He has received a prodigious shock."

Upon arriving at the hermit's home, the party found Mr. McGregor, the high sheriff, much im-

proved—the lameness in his back having proved less serious than he had anticipated. In fact, a potent botanical medicine, which Mr. Graham kept on hand, had worked in this case like a charm.

The officer's whole posse was now present, so that the rock walls of the mountain cave now shut in a larger company than they had ever before enclosed.

A large number of the robbers' spare horses had been found, and these, standing without, together with those of the sheriff's men, gave to the surroundings the appearance of a cavalry encampment.

Walter looked at Eli Stark, who, though much hurt, was now entirely conscious.

The wily old robber recognized the boy with a start of surprise.

"I know you," he said, feebly, "but how came you here? I thought you were dead, till I saw you the other evening at Mercer's."

"I was found in the stream and rescued," said Walter—"no thanks to you or your gang! How could you have had the cruelty to act as you did in the stage coach and give me up into the hands of those villains?"

"Your father testified once in court against my son and me, and gave us a great deal of trouble. I meant to trouble him in turn and make him pay well besides. But I ought to have let you alone—I see that now—it was the greatest mistake I ever made."

"I am sorry for you," said Walter, "bad as you have been to me, but I have meant to bring you to justice if I could."

"Sorry!" said the old man; "I didn't think anybody could be sorry for old Eli Stark."

A number of the sheriff's posse stood in a semicircle about the wounded robber's couch, and their interest in the scene was intense.

Mr. Graham stepped forward, standing in the full

lamplight. "Eli Stark, do you know *me?*" he asked.

"You? You?" said the old man, looking up in a wild, confused manner, "how should I? Yes—no—it can't be! I've seen you somewhere though. Graham—you're not Gerald Graham?"

It must have been the long hair and beard that left him in doubt.

"Yes," said Mr. Graham, "that is my name. You have good cause to remember it; and you know it is the name of one who has never injured you."

"I know it well," replied the criminal; "you never did me any harm, Gerald."

"But to clear yourself, you caused me to be suspected of acts that I never thought of committing," said Mr. Graham.

"Yes, that is true; and if my confession can do you any good now, you are welcome to it."

"You caused me the disgrace of an arrest and trial," continued Mr. Graham.

"Yes, and it was only a disagreement of the jury that saved you. They stood ten for conviction, and two for acquittal."

"You yourself," said Mr. Graham, "had committed the thefts of which you accused me, but you made our partners believe that I was guilty—and they still think so."

"I don't know what they think now; they thought so then," replied Eli.

"And in regard to other matters still more disgraceful," said the hermit, "you wrote letters and memoranda with a perfect imitation of my hand and signature, knowing they would fall into the hands of the police. Some doubt was, indeed, thrown on their genuineness, but they had their effect in so far as to make me suspected by almost all my friends."

"That is true," replied Eli, "and so you fled from

mankind. You were foolish there, Gerald; I would have fought it out."

"You seem very willing to make this confession—you are very cool about it."

"Why not? It is only giving away what will never be of any use to me. Besides, I have nothing against you. I did these things simply to save myself."

"Will you make a clean statement of the circumstances, so that the sheriff may put down the whole in writing?"

"Certainly. It cannot harm me. I may live or I may not live; but your affair cannot effect me for the worse."

The sheriff sat down with pen and paper, while old Eli related the particulars. Then the wounded man signed the paper, and the officer and his deputy witnessed it.

"You were driven wild by these things," said Mr. Mercer to his brother-in-law, "but neither Isabel nor I ever doubted you."

"Others did," said Mr. Graham, "but perhaps I was too impetuous in my decision to have nothing more to do with mankind."

"Yes," said Mr. Mercer, "I am sure you were."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE LAST OF THE HERMIT.

The high sheriff now made a careful examination of the treasure, and had all the coin counted and the other valuables assorted and enumerated.

These latter were contained in a large tin box. In it were packed no fewer than one hundred and thirty-nine gold watches, mostly fine and costly ones. There were, besides, rings, brooches, earrings, and all

kinds of jewelry, set with diamonds, rubies and other precious stones.

"What a wonderful collection those robbers got together!" exclaimed the sheriff, who, like all the rest, was amazed at the value of the contents of the box.

"They must have been in the business for a number of years," remarked the hermit. "It is strange that I never came across them till so lately."

"Pray inspect Mr. Mercer's boxes as soon as you can, sir," said Walter to the sheriff. The boy was anxious to know beyond a doubt that Maud's father had recovered his lost gold.

"I will, my boy," replied the sheriff, who now turned to the four tin boxes which bore Mr. Mercer's name.

It took some time to count the great quantity of bullion they contained, but at last the task was completed, and it was found that each box contained exactly twenty-five thousand dollars, making a total of one hundred thousand—the very sum that Mr. Mercer had lost.

Old Eli watched the proceedings with a rather sickly smile. It probably was not very pleasant to him to see the treasure that he had so boldly and wickedly carried off, now handled once more by its rightful owner.

"That gold," he said, when the counttng was finished, "has never been displaced since we first—well, *found* it. I had been informed beforehand exactly how much the boxes contained, and when we got hold of them we just cut them open once to amuse ourselves with a sight of the gold within them ; then they were soldered up again, and I hid them away myself where that boy found them."

"Didn't the rest of your gang know where the treasure was concealed?" asked the sheriff.

"Only some of the most trustworthy," replied old Eli. "Most of them were not told of the exact spot."

When Mr. Mercer's boxes had been examined, there remained only the four wooden boxes.

These also were found to be filled with gold, in coin and bars, to the value, as near as could be ascertained, of about one hundred and twenty thousand dollars.

"Where did all this come from?" the sheriff asked Eli Stark.

"Oh, from a good many different sources," replied the old robber, coolly; "it came mostly in small amounts—a few hundred dollars at a time. The biggest haul was twelve thousand, which was taken when a Wells Fargo express messenger was killed not far from here."

"Yes, I remember that crime," said the sheriff; "and the men who committed it richly deserve to be hung."

So it appeared that Mr. Mercer's hundred thousand dollars was by far the largest amount of plunder the robbers had ever secured at one robbery; but it had been a fatal stroke for them, for that was the first link in the chain of events that had brought them within the power of the law.

Mr. McGregor went on talking to old Eli, who was now so wonderfully frank in his admissions.

"Why did you come up into this part of the cavern?" asked the sheriff.

"Accident, all accident," said the old man. "We had never examined the place on this side, and I had not the least idea of finding it inhabited when I strayed up here from the lake."

Arrangements were now made for a return to the settlement. Mr. Graham would accompany the party, while Ralph and three of the sheriff's men

would be left at the cave in charge of old Eli, who could not now be removed.

"I suppose I will have to trim my beard and hair for the occasion," said the hermit. "Do any of you understand cutting hair?"

The sheriff's men seemed to distrust their acquirements in this respect.

"I should think Ralph might succeed very well," suggested Walter.

But Ralph shook his head when applied to, and pointed to his own hair which had all the wildness of a lion's mane.

"He means that he believes in long hair," said Mr. Graham, "and has never acted the barber. I am sure *you* could do it to my satisfaction, Walter."

"I'll try," said our young friend, "if you wish me to, but I may not do it in the best style."

"I'm sure you could do it like a barber from Paris," said Mr. Graham. "Here are the scissors and the comb. I like to encourage enterprise, and get an 'axe ground' at the same time!"

Walter took the scissors and commenced operations, stopping often to review his work.

"Go on," said the hermit, "you are doing admirably, as I see by the mirror."

The operation did indeed reflect credit upon the young artist.

"Superb!" said Mr. Graham, when his shortened locks had been combed and brushed smooth. "Now for the beard."

"That, too, was trimmed neatly, and the hermit stood before his guests a really fine-looking man of some forty-five years. Next he dressed himself in an ordinary and becoming suit; and thus the change in his outward man was rendered complete. The *hermit* had

"Melted into air, into thin air."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A HAPPY REUNION.

The ride to the settlement was an exhilarating one, as well from the rugged mountain scenery as from the complete success which had crowned the expedition. All felt happy, and Walter was quite triumphant when he thought of the part he had played in recovering the wealth of Maud's father.

The recovered treasure was safely bestowed to await such arrangements as might be made with the view of restoring it to its rightful owners as soon as the various claims should be established.

As to Mr. Mercer's property, the evidence was so direct that he would experience no difficulty; and Walter felt extremely glad of this, as he wished Maud to receive the good news without the shadow of a drawback, such as would arise if there were any doubt or delay involved in the restoration of the hundred thousand dollars.

Both Mr. Mercer and the other sufferers had offered great rewards for the recovery of what they had lost; but our young lad had resolved from the first that for his share in the work, should he be ever so successful, he would accept not a single dollar from any one.

"I am in no want of money," he reasoned, "and the thought of doing a good deed for pay would have spoiled all the satisfaction I have felt in hunting the robbers down or looking for the treasure."

"Now," said Mr. Mercer at length, when assured that his golden store was under safe guard, "we will go out to my home without more delay. I am impatient to give my wife and Maud a pleasant surprise."

"Come, Gerald! come Walter! It seems odd enough to be able to carry a sunny face home with me! It is a thing I hardly thought ever to do again, only a few days ago."

As they were upon the point of setting out, Mr. McGregor, the sheriff, appeared with a smiling face.

"I have good news for you, Walter," he said. "Your parents have just arrived from San Francisco. I did not know exactly where you were, and told your father I would look you up."

This was extremely pleasant intelligence, as well to Mr. Mercer and Mr. Graham as to their boy friend.

"Tell them," said Mr. Mercer, as Walter prepared to hurry away with the sheriff, "that they, too, must go home with me. I shall accept no refusal. Come back as soon as you can and take me to see them."

Mr. and Mrs. Dayton were overjoyed at meeting their boy well and happy after all the dangers he had passed. They were very anxious to hear from his lips the full story of all his strange adventures.

"Oh," said the good lady, "how much I have suffered! It has been the most dreadful trial I ever experienced.'

"I knew nothing of the occurrence," said Mr. Dayton, "till my arrival at San Francisco day before yesterday. One might as well be out of the world as in the peninsula of Lower California, as far as news is concerned. Thank heaven! it is all over now; but what a state of mind I should have been in had I known of it at the time! I should have come here at once; but what could I have done?"

Mr. Mercer's invitation was accepted in the kindly spirit in which it was given; and the party of five arrived at his wide log house after a pleasant ride on horseback.

Maud, with the rich locks flung back from her

forehead and reaching to her shapely waist, ran out to meet her father, breathless with impatience to learn the result of his efforts.

She paused and blushed at sight of the strange faces who were with him, and Walter thought she never looked prettier than now.

"It is all right, Maud!" cried Mr. Mercer, "every dollar of the treasure has been recovered!"

"Oh, how did you find it?" she cried, excitedly; "I am so glad! so glad!"

"Walter found it, all by himself, in the cave," replied her father. "We have him to thank for our good fortune."

Maud's head seemed to whirl with the excess of her emotions. For a few moments she was very pale, then the rich blood gave her face all the crimson of morning.

The glance she bestowed upon Walter had in it an indescribable blending of gratitude and modest admiration.

"This gentleman and lady are Mr. and Mrs. Dayton," said Mr. Mercer.

The young girl greeted them with graceful simplicity; and meantime cast a timid glance towards the third stranger, who was a little in the rear of the others.

"And this gentleman," added her father, indicating Mr. Graham, "it is quite possible that you may have met before."

For an instant Maud looked puzzled; then suddenly she sprang forward, with a glad cry, for she had recognized the former hermit.

"Oh, uncle Gerald!" she exclaimed, "for you are he, I am sure you are! I was only seven years old when you went away, uncle Gerald, but I remember you ever so well! Oh, how glad mamma, too, will be to see you!"

"Uncle Gerald" was strongly moved by the unaffected welcome of his fair young niece—who had been his pet in by-gone days.

Mrs. Mercer was as much overjoyed at the sudden reappearance of her long-lost brother as at the restoration of her husband's wealth.

Figuratively if not literally, the fatted calf was killed for the occasion; and Walter could not help feeling that his old friend of the mountain cave had yet much to live for, and would be a different man, when restored to his friends, and no longer a hermit in the mountain cave.

Next day, our two young people once more visited the scene of their former stroll; and again the boy wreathed the head of his bewitching companion with flowers. They talked earnestly of the past as they sat on the rocks or loitered in the shade of the tall trees.

"How strange it all seems!" said Maud. "It appears like something the fairies have done! When we were here only a few days ago, my father was poor—and now he is rich again! How little I thought of this when we were in the stage coach! What a dreadful night that was!

"And all our good fortune is owing to you! Papa says so, and I know it is so, too. If the robbers had never taken you prisoner, you would not have known anything about them; and papa says no other boy would have followed them as you have done. I'm sure *I* never knew any who would!"

"They made me mad," said Walter, "and, besides, I thought they ought to be brought to justice. I thought, too, how delightful it would be if your father could get back his property."

"Papa says uncle Gerald can make his fortune with the models he has invented," said Maud. "He thinks they are just what are needed at the present

time. He got a sight of them while he was at the cavern and asked uncle about them."

"I think they must be something remarkable," replied Walter, "but I am not a good judge."

"Yes." said Maud, "papa says that uncle Gerald has made an improvement in steam engines that will be used everywhere when it is introduced, and will make a fortune for the inventor."

"I'm sure I hope it will," replied her boy friend.

"What a wonderful place that cave must be," remarked Maud; "it almost frightens me to think of it! If I had known you were away in there in the dark, I should have been afraid you would never get out. Suppose you had got lost!"

"Oh, it is glorious!" said Walter. "Such walls and pillars with stars all over them! I wish you could see what a grand place it is!"

"But didn't the bats make you afraid? And didn't you have some dreadful thoughts while you were trying to get out the gold with that great mammoth tusk?"

Walter laughed at his companion's pretty earnestness. "No," he said, "I worked so hard that I hadn't time to think of anything dreadful."

"Oh, my!" said Maud. "I should have had time! How glad I am that you got out safe!"

Again Walter thought — "What sweet, pretty eyes!" He was standing on more dangerous ground than when in the cavern.

CHAPTER XL.

CONCLUSION.

It now only remains for us to briefly relate the further fortunes of the actors in that strange drama of events that culminated in the mountain cave.

Old Eli Stark, the leader of the villainous gang of

robbers, recovered from his injuries, and was transferred from the cavern to the jail; thence—after trial—to the State prison, together with all his confederates. He was sentenced for a long term of years, and he died in prison before his punishment was over.

Bill Jinks received a much lighter sentence than the others, in consideration of his confession and the lesser number of his offenses. He was a rough and foolish young fellow, but not a criminal at heart. This experienee was a lesson to him that bore good fruit. When he came out of State prison he went to work on a farm in Oregon, where he made an honest effort to lead a better life.

As soon as his affairs could be arranged, Mr. Mercer removed with his family to San Francisco, greatly to the delight of Walter, who knew that he could now take Maud out in his yacht on that magnificent bay which has so few equals on the Pacific coast.

"Oh, let me tell you the news," she said to him one morning, as he met her on the way to school. "Uncle Gerald has disposed of the models of all his inventions at a sweep—all the strange things he made in the cave. He has been paid a hundred thousand dollars for them. Only think of it! I am so glad, for he is such a good man!"

Walter's eyes sparkled. "It does me more good than it would to have found twice that amount," he replied. "How well I remember the time when I first saw him at work on one of those inventions! I thought him a robber then, and supposed that the thing was some wicked machine for operating on a bank safe or blowing up a vault. But what a big mistake I made! I know now that there isn't a better man in the world."

"You must have had dreadful feelings at that time."

"I did ; but I was determined not to let him know it."

"And now," said Maud, "I have something quite romantic to tell you. I believe, after all, that uncle Gerald was born to good fortune. Isn't it strange that the lady to whom I told my story in the stage coach, should have proved to be an old acquaintance of his that he thought a great deal of when they were young together. Neither of them ever married, and mamma says she believes they still think much of each other."

"Oh," said Walter, "won't we have a fine time when we all go visiting the cavern together, as we are to do next summer?"

"We shall indeed, I hope," said Maud, who looked as happy as Walter.

"We can go boating on the subterranean lake," continued the boy. "Ralph says the canoes are still there—both of them—taken in out of the weather ; so they will be all ready for us."

"Uncle is real good to Ralph," said Maud, "and he will never have to do any work again, unless he should choose to. Uncle Gerald and he will both be good pilots for us about the mountains."

"We'll have a nice little party," said Walter, "and carry dozens of lanterns. I shall want you to see the stalactites and how they shine. I don't think half the lake is discovered yet."

"And we shall see the island where you found the gold," said Maud. "I want to see the mammoth tusk too, for I shall think how you worked with it."

"It will be there unless the geologists get around ahead of us," replied Walter. "You know," he added, laughing, "that Bret Harte makes Truthful James say that the geological society upon the Stanislaus is broken up ; so *those* fellows, at least, won't trouble us."

Maud laughed, musically. "My!" she said, "I

know I shall be frightened at first; but then if you—all of us are there together—Oh, the last bell! I forgot it was so late. Well, good morning, Walter!"

"Good morning, Maud!"

And so they parted for the moment, each with thoughts that one can better guess at than describe.

THE END.

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